DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON

PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE

KITAB MAHAL
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[An Exhaustive Critical Study, with Text,
Notes, and Questions with Answers]

KITAB MAHAL—LAHORE

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Dr. Samuel Johnson—His Life and Works

Family background and schooling. Samuel Johnson was born on the 18th September, 1709 in a house which is now preserved in public hands in memory of him. His father, Michael Johnson, was a book-seller at Lichfield. His father's family was so obscure that he once said, "I can hardly tell who was my grandfather." His mother was Sarah Ford, who came of a good yeoman stock. She was both a good and an intelligent woman. Samuel was the only ultimately surviving issue of the marriage. The boy made an impression upon people from the first. He went to Lichfield Grammar School, and then at the age of fifteen to Stourbridge. At both places he won the regard of fellow-students and teachers alike. He was a curious combination of the invalid and the prize-fighter. He played none of the ordinary games, but he was yet acknowledged as a leader by the boys, and his abilities were a matter of pride for the school. He already exhibited an amazing memory.

At Pembroke College, Oxford. After leaving Stourbridge, Johnson spent two years at home in desultory reading. He piled up a good deal of learning the result of which was that, when he went up to Oxford, the Master of his College said, he was "the best qualified for the University that he had ever known come there." His College was Pembroke, of which he became a Commoner* in 1728. Oxford seems not to have meant much to him, and he spent a good deal of his time at the College gates with a circle of young students around him. But he did some solid reading, especially Greek.

Returned to Lichfield without a degree. A lack of funds forced the young Johnson, after only thirteen months' residence at Pembroke College, to quit Oxford without a degree in December, 1729. His want of shoes had prevented his attending lectures. His pride had prevented his receiving help from charitable sources. A friend who had promised support failed him. His father's business

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* *Commoner* : at Oxford University, a student not on foundation, that is not entitled to any of its financial benefits.

had been reduced to little. But he had made an impression at the College for which he had developed a strong affection, and he liked going to stay there in the days of his glory. His usual host was Dr. Adams, the Master of Pembroke, who had once been his tutor and who had been so impressed by his abilities as to remark that this pupil was "above my mark". After leaving Oxford, Johnson returned to his Lichfield home, where his fath-r died two months later, leaving behind an estate worth hardly twenty pounds.

Marriage to a widow. In 1732, Johnson went to Birmingham at the invitation of his former school-fellow, Edmund Hector. There he translated, from its French version, an account of Abyssinia by a Portuguese Jesuit. Published in 1735, this was Johnson's first book. Through it he became familiar with a body of material which he later drew upon in writing his greatest creative work, *Rasselas*. In Birmingham he also met a widow, Elizabeth Porter, whom he married in July, 1735. She was twenty years older than himself and not of attractive appearance. She had been a widow for just ten months when the marriage took place ; and in Johnson's own words, "it was a love-marriage upon both sides". Johnson's sincere and lasting love for her cannot be doubted, though the marriage provoked much humorous comment in the small world of their acquaintances.

Opened a private school. **Visit to London.** With the financial help provided by his wife, Johnson opened a private school at Edial near Lichfield. But this venture was not a success. He was perhaps temperamentally unsuited to the vocation of a schoolmaster. Certainly he did not attract enough students. As an episode in his life, this venture remains chiefly memorable because David Garrick, afterwards the most famous actor of the day, was one of his pupils. The lack of pupils proved a blessing in disguise, for it enabled Johnson to write the better part of his tragedy *Irene*, with which he went to London in March, 1737 in order to make a fresh start. The young Garrick went with him to study law, and when Garrick became a rich, famous, and rather vain man, Johnson, who liked to curb the insolence of wealth, once referred to 1732 as the year "when I came to London with two pence half-penny in my pocket ; and thou, Davy, with three half-pence in thine." Nothing came of this first visit to the capital.

***London* and *Life of Savage*.** In the summer of 1737, Johnson returned to Lichfield, and finished his tragedy. Then he went to London again, this time with his wife, and London remained his home for the rest of his life. His efforts to get *Irene* performed on the stage were unsuccessful, but he soon began to write regularly for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, to which he contributed prefaces, biographies, essays, reviews, and poems. In May 1738, appeared his poem, *London*, an imitation in the Augustan manner of Juvenal's famous satire on Rome. He got ten guineas for it, but the poem

also made his reputation. Commenting on the poem, Pope said that its author would soon become famous. In 1744, he published the biography of his mysterious friend, Richard Savage, who had died in 1743. Savage and Johnson had been companions in their extreme poverty and in their intellectual pleasures. Mrs. Johnson having been out of London at this time, the two struggling men of letters often passed nights together, walking and talking in the streets without the money to pay for a night's lodging. Johnson's *Life of Savage* met a favourable reception. Its publication was the occasion of Joshua Reynold's first becoming acquainted with Johnson's name.

Plan for a Dictionary. The year 1745 proved the literary turning point of Johnson's life. In this year he laid the foundation-stone of the authority and the fame he was soon to enjoy. He published a pamphlet on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which won the praise of Warburton, for which Johnson always felt grateful and about which he said : "He praised me at a time when praise was of value to me." And he began to occupy himself with the idea of preparing an English dictionary. In 1747, he published his *Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language*, addressed to Lord Chesterfield, in which he set out the intended scope and nature of the work. In the same year he wrote the admirable *Prologue* for the opening performance of the new season of Drury Lane Theatre. His pupil David Garrick had just become the manager of this theatre. In the *Prologue*, Johnson offered a trenchant survey of English drama from Shakespeare to his own day, characteristically urging the audience to exercise moral judgment in preferring "useful mirth, and salutary woe to empty sound and show."

***Irene* performed.** Garrick's arrival at Drury Lane also meant that Johnson could now be sure of seeing his own tragedy, *Irene*, appear on the stage. Produced on 6th February, 1749, it ran for nine nights, and was at least a financial success in that Johnson got almost three hundred pounds from his three benefit nights and its publication. It was, however, never revived. It was "rather a poem in dialogue than a drama," and its formal and stilted language robbed the characters of any individuality of speech or emotional appeal.

The Vanity of Human Wishes. In the same year, 1749, Johnson's poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, was published. It was another Juvenalian imitation, but freer and bolder than the first. The poem contains a bitter comment on human fate and demonstrates the unhappiness which results from man's inability to curb his hopes and desires. The poem is not so much satirically as tragically ironic. The awe and pity with which Johnson contemplates the spectacle of human unfulfilment makes it an impressive tragic poem.

The *Rambler*. From 1750 to 1752, Johnson wrote for the *Rambler*. This periodical never had a large circulation. Johnson's

contributions show him at his gravest, and many of his essays in it are scarcely distinguishable from sermons. But that age had grave tastes and few temptations to frivolity. The greatest pleasure this work brought Johnson was the praise of his wife who said to him, "I thought very well of you before ; but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this." When the *Rambler* appeared as a book, it sold well and had gone through at least twelve editions by the time Boswell wrote his biography of Johnson. The style of *Rambler* has been criticised as too ponderous and Latinate. Johnson himself thought it "too wordy". Certainly in no other work did he use longer sentences or as many difficult words.

The *Dictionary*. In April, 1755, three years after *Rambler* had ceased publication, and also three years after the death of Johnson's wife, the great *Dictionary* appeared. It may safely be said that no single Englishman has ever accomplished a literary task of such vast extent. The mere labour of collecting and arranging the materials of such a work was enormous. During the period since 1747, Johnson had received from Lord Chesterfield to whom he had addressed his *Plan for a Dictionary*, nothing except a gift of ten pounds, and then, at the end of 1754 a flattering notice in one of the weekly periodicals. But Johnson now sent Chesterfield his famous letter stating the difficulties he had overcome in completing his task, and rejecting Chesterfield's patronage. A much greater cause for jubilation was the degree of M.A. which the University of Oxford conferred on the author, and which appeared after his name on the title page.

Success and fame. Soon the "harmless drudge", as he himself had defined a lexicographer, had become the acknowledged law-giver and dictator of English letters. He gathered round him a society of the finest minds of that generation. He received (in 1762) a government pension which secured his independence. And he began (1765) the long friendship with the Thrales, which gave him a second home for more than fifteen years.

Rasselas. Within a year after the publication of the *Dictionary* Johnson wrote his *Proposals for an Edition of Shakespeare.* (His *Shakespeare* is generally regarded as the second in time and in importance of his three great works). His new position secured him a good number of subscribers and he intended to publish his Edition of Shakespeare the next year, 1757, though the book did not actually appear till 1765. From 1758 to 1760, Johnson produced a weekly paper called the *Idler*, of the same character as the *Rambler*. In 1759, he wrote a novel, *Rasselas* The object in writing this story was to raise money for his mother's funeral. He received hardly a hundred pounds for the first, and twenty-five pounds for the second, edition of the novel. This work has often been called Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* in prose. It is a pessimistic story. Johnson presents as the main cause of human unhappiness the perennial

conflict between hope and reality, or the essentially impractical tendencies of the mind itself.

New friends : Boswell ; the Thrales. In 1763, Johnson met James Boswell for the first time. Fortune now began to smile upon him in good earnest. In 1764, the Literary Club was founded. It numbered among its original members such distinguished men as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, and Oliver Goldsmith. The Club provided Johnson for the rest of his life with an ideal forum for the display of his amazing powers of conversation. In 1765, Johnson first met Henry Thrale, a wealthy brewer, and his vivacious and cultivated young wife. No event contributed so much to the happiness of Johnson in these after-years. For Thrale, who was elected M.P. for Southwark later in 1765, Johnson wrote a number of electioneering notices and addresses over the next fifteen years. With Mrs. Thrale, who shared his own literary interests, he began a long and intimate correspondence. So much a member of the Thrale family did he become that he accompanied them on their visits to various places. It may be said that the Thrales' house was more of a home to him than anything else he ever knew.

***Edition of Shakespear* ; *Lives of the Poets* ; academic honours.** The Edition of Shakespeare's plays, which had been planned for so many years, was finally published in October, 1765. This Edition is remarkable for the famous *Preface* and the distinctive notes that it contains. Johnson had now become a comparatively prosperous man. He received many honours and compliments of different kinds. Dublin University conferred the degree of LL.D. on him in 1765. He had his well-known interview with George III, in 1767. The Royal Academy appointed him its Professor in Ancient Literature in 1769. The University of Oxford conferred the honorary degree of D.C.L. on him in 1775. In 1777, he started working on the *Lives of the Poets* which he completed in 1781. Matters of less importance in these years were the publication of his *Journey to the Western Islands*, the *Prologue* to Goldsmith's *Good-Natured Man*, and his political pamphlets. But his principal occupation in his old age was talking to his friends. He travelled a good deal, often visiting Oxford, his old home at Lichfield, and his friend Taylor's house in Derbyshire.

Death. Burial in Westminster Abbey. In 1783, Johnson had a paralytic stroke, and he lost his powers of speech for some days. His strong constitution enabled him to recover rapidly, but never again did he know even that modest measure of health which he had once enjoyed. The inevitable loss of friends joined with illness to depress his last years. The year 1784 opened with a prolonged illness lasting for months. The end came on the 13th December, 1784. He was buried in Westminster Abbey on the 20th December. Burke and Windham, with Colman the dramatist, and Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society, were

among the pall-bearers. Seldom had the death of a man of letters created such a sense of loss either in the public or among his friends.

George Saintsbury thus comments on the work and reputation of Dr. Samuel Johnson :

"During the later part of his lifetime, Johnson was undoubtedly regarded as a sort of unofficial head of English literature, and also as a great philosopher and sage. But the Romantic school bitterly disliked Johnson's literary principles and practice, though not his political and religious theories, while these latter have become unpopular since. It has thus been usual during the greater part of the nineteenth century to extol Johnson's moral character, and feel or affect delight in his biography, while assigning him no high place as a writer. It is true that with the not quite certain exception of the *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson can claim no single work uniting bulk with value of matter and originality of form. His work in verse is very small, and though all of it is scholarly and some elegant, it is universally composed in obedience to a very narrow and jejune theory of English versification and English poetics generally. Nothing perhaps but the beautiful epitaph on his friend Levett, and the magnificent statement of his religious pessimism in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, distinctly transcends mediocrity. His tragedy of *Irene* is not a very good example of an entirely artificial and lifeless kind. Although his essays have been oftener under-than over-valued of late, they are far from original in conception, and those at least of the *Rambler* are too often injured by the excessively stiff and cumbrous style which has been rather unjustly identified with Johnson's manner of writing generally. His *Dictionary*, though a wonderful monument of enterprise and labour, and though containing many acute and some witty definitions, is, as he well knew himself, but "drudgery", and his political pamphlets, though forcible and sensible, and his *Journey to the Hebrides*. though interesting, suffer also from "Johnsonese*". His often beautiful prayers and meditations, his occasional work in inscriptions and the like, are, as well as the *Dictionary*, not easily classifiable literature, though they testify to the literary saturation of his mind and thought. *Rasselas*, an admirable though a mannered composition, and perhaps the chief document for Johnson's practical though melancholy wisdom, must always underlie the objection that it holds itself out as a story, but has really no story to tell, nor even (save in Imlac, who is partly Johnson) any character to bring out.

It is extremely fortunate that very late, and as it were accidentally, he was induced to leave an adequate and permanent monument of his powers in the *Lives of the Poets*. In these literary

*Johnsonese" is the term coined to describe Johnson's stiff and pompous style of writing.

biographies, of which long before he had given an example in the *Life of Savage*, he practically struck into a new development of the essay—one to which Dryden had sometimes come near, and which he would have carried out with surpassing excellence had the time been ripe, but which had not been actually anticipated by any. It is no matter that Johnson's standards and view-points are extravagantly and exclusively of his time, so that occasionally —the cases of Milton and Gray are the chief—he falls into critical errors almost incomprehensible except from the historic side. Even these extravagances fix the critical creed of the day for us in an inestimable fashion, while in the great bulk of the *Lives* this criticism does no harm, being duly adjusted to the subjects. Johnson's estimate of Chaucer doubtless would have been, as his *Rambler* remarks on Spenser actually are, worthless except as a curiosity. But of Dryden, of Pope, and of the numerous minor poets of their time and his, he could speak with a competently adjusted theory, with admirable literary knowledge and shrewdness and with a huge store of literary tradition which his long and conversation-loving life had accumlated, and which would have been lost for us had he not writtten."

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Dr. Samuel Johnson—His Temperament and Personality

Ill-health. Johnson was constantly ill all through his life. His melancholy, and his belief in the general unhappiness of human life, were most probably the result of his chronic ailments and constitutional infirmities. At the same time, paradoxical as it may seem, he had great bodily strength which enabled him bravely to endure his physical ailments and aches. A vein of rudeness, almost of fierceness, sometimes appeared in his conversation ; this was the natural temper of an invalid and suffering giant.

A kind of dictator. Johnson was a figure of note among his contemporaries. "There are four great dictatorial figures in English literature, each of whom seem to have been recognised in his age as the supreme authority in the world of letters. In the time of James I there was Ben Jonson, reigning at the Mermaid Tavern ; after the Restoration came Dryden to give his views in the coffee-house ; then followed Pope ; and after him arose Dr. Johnson to utter his downright judgments in tavern and drawing-room, and bookshops, and at the Literary Club."

Physical traits. His physical traits have been given permanence by the painter Reynolds in a striking portrait—the burly figure, the neck sunk between the shoulders, the thick features, with a heavy chin, a narrow wrinkled forehead, and full lips ; the questioning and frowning gaze ; the expression of concentrated, somewhat bitter seriousness. Yet this seemingly unprepossessing man was one of the noblest, and kindest, and wisest, and most lovable, and most typical Englishmen that English literature or English history can show. The rough vigour, the gravity, the obstinate realism, which his physiognomy suggested made a silent appeal to the deep instincts of the English people. Carlyle, an admirer of spiritual force associated with an uncouth exterior, ranked Johnson among the national heroes.

Fear of insanity. Johnson never knew "the natural joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs ; when he walked it was like

the struggling gait of one in fetters" (the words are Boswell's). All accounts agree that his strange gesticulations and contortions were painful for his friends to witness and attracted crowds of starers in the streets. But Reynolds said that he could sit still for his portrait to be taken, and that when his mind was engaged by conversation the convulsions ceased. In the physical sense, he was perpetually miserable; he had throughout his life a haunting fear of becoming insane; and he had many grave attacks of illness. But no man was ever more fearless of pain than Johnson. The only thing he was afraid of was death. There exists conclusive and overwhelming evidence of the intensity of that fear in him but it was not a physical, but a moral and intellectual, fear.

Many-sided personality. Johnson's personality and achievement were many-sided and very impressive, with the result that he attracted the attention of a number of contemporary biographers—Mrs. Thrale, Sir John Hawkins, and James Bosewell—who published their impressions of him—in 1786, 1787, and 1791 respectively. Of these, Hawkins is the least interesting and informative. Bosewell's biography comes to life because of his eye for detail, his incomparable and first-hand reporting of Johnson's witty and vigorous conversation with a large number of distinguished contemporaries, and his own contrasting personality, which so often acts as a foil to Johnon's. Mrs. Thrale's account is, however, in some ways a better guide to Johnson's literary opinions and preferences even than Boswell's.

Contradictory qualities. "As a person, Johnson possessed his share of those contradictory qualities that Bosewell declared to be so characteristic of him. No one had a rougher exterior, or a kinder heart. Though untidy and shambling in appearance, he valued true politeness. Though he rarely showed forbearance towards an opponent in conversation, he was sincere in making charity one of the guiding principles of his life. Though an obvious authoritarian, he prized human liberty. A man of strong passions and appetites, he set a high value on chastity and moderation. Inclined to ridicule those who complained of low spirits, he suffered from acute melancholia. Though a devout Christian, he feared that he might not be saved*. Such contradictory qualities reflected in Johnson's personality impart to his writings their peculiar depth and resonance."

Disapproved of cold reserve. Johnson always condemned the cold reserve so common among Englishmen. Two strangers of any other nation, he used to say, will find some topic of talk at once when thrown into an inn parlour together: two Englishmen will go each to a different window and remain in obstinate silence. He boasted that he never felt strange in a strange place. He would talk at his best in a coach with perfect strangers, to their great

*"saved", in the spiritual sense. The soul's salvation is meant

amazement and delight. At all times he hated and dreaded being alone, both on moral and medical grounds, having the fear of madness always in his mind.

Talent for conversation. Johnson, who had long regarded conversation as the thief amusement, came in later years to regard it as almost the chief employment of his life. He had studied the art of conversation with the zeal of a man pursuing a favourite hobby. The clubs which he delighted to attend were excellently adapted to foster his peculiar talent for conversation. His talk was characterized by appropriate illustrations, keen arguments, rapid flashes of wit and humour, scornful retorts, and dexterous sophistry. He always talked for victory, and would use any device that came to hand in order to emerge as the victor. Some of his remarks and retorts have become famous. He once said : "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well ; but it is surprising to find it done at all." Of Hume and his fellow sceptics, he said : "Truth will not afford sufficient food to their vanity ; so they have betaken themselves to error. Truth, Sir, is a cow that will yield such people no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull."

One day at Mrs. Thrale's house he talked at great length on the pre-eminence of the University of Oxford, although there were no fewer than five men from Cambridge University present in the room. At last Mrs. Thrale pointed this out to him. Johnson replied with grim jocularity : "I did not think of that till you told me ; but the wolf don't count the sheep". Once he made the following reply to a man who said that he did not understand him : "Sir, I have found you an argument ; but I am not obliged to find you an understanding." Boswell often paid for the pleasure of Johnson's company by being made a target of ridicule. Once he received the following rebuke from Johnson : "Sir, you have but two topics, yourself and me. I am sick of both." Scotland was another target of his attacks. One day when he had been speaking of it as a very vile country, a Scotsman reminded him that God had made it. "Certainly, He did", said Johnson, "but we must always remember that He made it for Scotchmen ; and comparisons are odious, but God made hell." More beautifully phrased was his famous reply to a man who had praised Scotland for its noble prospects (meaning, excellent scenery) : "But, Sir, let me tell you the noblest prospect, which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England." It was Johnson who made the remark which is often quoted by all and sundry : "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Johnson's idea of conversation was to overcome the adversary at any cost ; to knock him down by arguments, or, when these failed, by personal ridicule ; to dogmatize on every possible question, pronounce a few oracles, and then desist with the air of victory. Concerning the philosopher Hume's view of death, he said : Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed, he is mad. If he does not think so, he lies." There was nothing

more to be said. Once a lady asked him, "Dr. Johnson, why did you define *pastern* as the knee of a horse?" "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance," thundered the great authority.

Loved the city. Johnson was a great lover of the city of London. He cared nothing for its architecture or for its history. Still less had his love anything to do with the commercial greatness of this city. He thought of London as the place in all the world where the pulse of human life throbbed strongest. There a man could store his mind better than anywhere else. There he could not only live but grow. He loved London because it was the home of the intellectual pleasures which to him were the only real pleasures, and which made London for him a heaven upon earth. "He who is tired of London, is tired of life", he said on one occasion.

Boswell's biography Johnson has really been made to live in the pages of Boswell's biography: "Every detail of his oddly compounded but powerful personality is there portrayed for us; his countless eccentricities of behaviour; his fits of moroseness and downright brutality; his tenderness and warmth of heart; his wonderful shrewdness and wisdom; his fine mental honesty and hatred of all forms of cant; his bigotry, intolerance, and childish prejudices; his prodigious memory; his quickness of grasp and repartee; his extraordinary genius for talk." Boswell had devoted himself to Johnson as early as 1763, and for the remaining twenty-one years of Johnson's life, though not very frequently or for very long periods in his company, was in pretty constant communication with him Boswell was on the whole tolerated by the great man as he tolerated no one else He took infinite pains both before and after Johnson's death to procure all the information he could about him, and wove it into one of the most extraordinary books in literature—a book which from the day of its appearance to the present has always been read and rejoiced in, though for a score of different reasons Those who like Boswell at first like him even better after reading his *Life of Dr. Johnson*; those who do not like him at first become converted to him after reading the biography he wrote. Some of his greatest admirers think him a whole fool: nearly everyone thinks him in large part foolish. Except Pepys, whom he resembled in some ways, there is perhaps no author who is regarded with so much affection mingled with so much contempt. And he has written a biography of very great size, which is almost universally allowed to be the best in English literature.

Yet, though it may be admitted that Johnson owes his present fame mainly to Boswell, it is a mistake to ignore his own books, for he was a very great writer. At each point we have to recognize his limitations no doubt, but he was great both as a critic of literature and a critic of life."

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Johnson's *Dictionary* helped to fix the English language. By determining and classifying the diverse meanings of words, he gave greater sureness to the labour of analysis which constitutes a part of the art of writing. The omissions and errors of the *Dictionary*, notably in the yet badly explored domain of etymology ; the personal whims, the flights of prejudice or humour which lend a paradoxical air to many a definition ; an inadequate reading of texts, the effect of which is to give certain elements of the language an undue predominance over others—flaws such as these were inevitable. The *Dictionary* is the work of a single man, hampered by circumstances and by illness. It remains, however, a monument of industry and intellectual conscience. But it did nothing to restore to the language that freedom of imagination, that concrete wealth of idiom, which the practice of the Elizabethans possessed. While Johnson's instinct is unconsciously in agreement with the silent preparation of Romanticism, his intellect and reflection on the other hand are purely classical. The *Dictionary* represents the intellectualisation of the language effected by a whole century of analysis and logical effort.

Rassels (1759) is a novel. It is the story of an Abyssinian Prince's travels and experiences, his reflections on what he sees and the various discussions into which he enters. The story is, however, merely a framework on which Johnson hangs his own philosophy. There is hardly any incident, and the characterization is neither deep nor subtle. The subjects discussed are many. There is learning : "The life that is devoted to learning passes silently away, and is very little diversified by events." There is poetry : The poet "does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest : he is to exhibit in his portrait of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind." There is marriage : "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures." There are happiness and virtue, and immortality, and so on. The tone of the whole is that of Ecclesiastes—"vanity of vanities, all is vanity". According to Johnson "human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed." "Of the blessings set before you, take your choice, and be content." It is a philosophy of sombre resignation, which determinedly faces the facts of life in order to make the most of what life offers. The wisdom, often tersely and always effectively stated, is no new wisdom. But old wisdom when re-stated with the aphoristic brilliance of Johnson takes on new life. The style of *Rasselas* partakes less of "Johnsonese" and is clearer and more direct, shorter, brisker, and more effective.

Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works appeared in 1765. Much had been expected from it, but expectations were belied. A few emendations of the text and some scattered remarks on particular passages seemed to be all that had any novelty, except

some general observations, which served to illustrate the beauties, and mark the defects, of the various plays, provided at the end of each. And yet no textual student of shakespeare can afford to ignore Johnson's edition. For the apparent meagreness of the work, ample atonement was made by the *Preface* wherein all Johnson's powers of eloquence and critical erudition are displayed. The *Preface* is at the same time one of the noblest monuments of English neo-classic criticism (in its expression of the theory of imitation and of general human nature) and an exposure of some of the weaknesses, contradictions, and unnecessary rigidities of some widely accepted neo-classic principles by testing their effectiveness in assessing adequacy of imitation of nature and the giving of pleasure. Its pungent style, emphatic clarity, and tendency to epigrammatic summing up of each argument, carried its ideas home with enormous force.

Johnson did not hesitate to state what he believed to be Shakespeare's faults. Yet Shakespeare remained to him the greatest of English authors, and the only author worthy to be ranked with Homer. He, also, vindicated the liberties of the English stage. After conforming to be 'unities' in his own *Irene*, and then suggesting his doubts of them in the *Rambler*, he now proved that they were 'not essential to a just drama'. The guiding rule in his criticism was that 'there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature'. A generation later, the French 'romantics' found their case stated in the *Preface*, and they did not better what they borrowed. (Johnson's examination of the 'unities' is translated word for word in Henri Beyle's *Racine et Shakespeare*.)

The *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) was the work of Johnson's old age. It is a remarkable series of moral and critical judgments. He is at his best in writing of Dryden and Pope, whose age he understood and whose work he greatly admired, and of Cowley and Waller, men whose reputation was high in the days of Dryden and waning slowly in those of Pope. Addison, whom he knew well enough when and how to praise, had perhaps too many reservations to win Johnson's full sympathy. Swift he never understood, and the politics of Milton, as well as his religion, he found displeasing. The querulous note in Gray angered him, and the rawness evident in Collins made him less generous as a critic than he had been as a friend. Yet where he can see his way he gives full measure. *Paradise Lost* and Gray's *Elegy* are praised reasonably and well.

The *Lives of the Poets* is almost a treatise on certain phases of English poetry and certain aspects of English life. Like its author, it is often contradictory and often provoking. But it adds depth and dignity to the English critical tradition. Often an eccentric judgment in one place is corrected by a more balanced statement elsewhere. For example, his condemnation of the pastoral form

of *Lycidas* is well-known. He did not welcome the odes which were in his life-time once more becoming fashionable. What he disliked in Gray, Warton and Collins he attributed to the use of unsuitable models. He admired Milton but distrusted his influence on the living poetry of his own day.

"As a critic of literature, he is almost always penetrating and stimulating, though he sometimes allowed his strong prejudices to interfere with his judgment ; as when he failed to appreciate the value of Milton's poetry, because of his antipathy to Milton's politics and religion. In all his tastes and standards, he was a thorough-going conservative, holding fast to the principles of the Augustan school of poetry, and stoutly resisting every movement of revolt against what he regarded as the orthodox literary creed. As a moralist, he is characterised by remarkable sanity and massive common sense. Broadly speaking, he is a pessimist. Life, he declared, is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment ; we are stirred into activity by a feeling of this vacuity ; we spend our energies for the most part in the pursuit of illusory pleasures ; and when our desires are gratified, the usual result is satiety. Johnson developed these views in many of his miscellaneous writings, and most notably in two of his finest works, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas*. The former is an impressive sermon on the text which is stated in the title and which is supported by a number of typical illustrations taken from history. The latter, which is historically significant as a reply to the flimsy optimism of Shaftesbury and Pope, tells of a young Abyssinian prince who sets out to discover the perfect way of life, and from his varied experiences among all kinds of people learns at length that the happiness which they all seek is nowhere to be found. But, while the tone of Johnson's philosophy is thus profoundly sad, there is nothing debilitating about it. Throughout his life he made a most heroic fight against the besetting melancholy which was one consequence of his chronic ill-health, and the steady courage of his own manhood pervades his work. The essence of his teaching is that we should face the facts of existence honestly, and not talk sentimental nonsense about them (as Pope had certainly done), while we bear the evil uncomplainingly, and make the most we can of the good. Moreover, as the conclusions of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas* show, he was saved from utter hopelessness by his strong religious faith. As a prose writer, Johnson did not follow the lead of the Augustan masters, and in place of the easy grace of Addison and the vigorous idiomatic colloquialism of Swift, he gives us a style which is highly Latinized in vocabulary, and in sentence-structure is marked by elaborate balance and antithesis. Most readers now feel that his way of writing (or "Johnsonese" as Macaulay called it) is pompous and heavy. But it is never obscure, and at its best it has great strength, nobility, and dignity."

Johnson emphasises the need of accepting models and results already achieved, as opposed to the desirability of romantic experiment. And he did so both in his original writings and in his criticism of the writings of others. In his poetry he followed Pope's use of the heroic couplet. Like Pope, also, he modelled his poems on the work of Latin writers. (His poem *London*, for example, is a satire on the evils of society, in close imitation of Juvenal). His sympathy with classical ideas led him to observe the unities in his play *Irene*. In his prose, he continued the work of Dryden and Addison. His two most important prose works, his *Preface* to Shakespeare, and his *Lives of the Poets*, illustrate the point of view in matters of art which Dryden had established. His essays are modelled on the form set by the *Tatler*, though Johnson's essays are longer, heavier, and duller than Addison's. His moral tone, too, is more serious. Indeed, the seriousness of his moral tone is everywhere prominent ; and in this respect too he is a genuine representative of the classical era. His *Vanity of Human Wishes* is written in a strain of moral elevation. He accepted without question the classical dictum that works of art should both please and instruct. He wrote even the *Lives of the Poets* "in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety".

But although, in these particulars, Johnson illustrates the formal accepted point of view of the classical age, there are many signs in him of an individual reaction against it. It is true that he was a classicist in his insistence upon the universal in taste as opposed to the individual. But at the same time his sensible, reality-loving habit of mind led him to hit a sham when he saw it, even such a venerable and reverenced sham as the unities of dramatic action. In spite of his own conformity to classical requirement in *Irene*, he boldly points out, in his criticism of Shakespeare, that the acceptance of any theatrical production as real involves such concessions from the imagination of the audience that it is against common sense to refuse licence in minor matters. His attitude on this and other points serves to illustrate the reason of the eighteenth century at war with the principles of art which had been long assumed to be the highest expression of that reason. His position in the world of letters strikingly illustrates the approaching end of the era which had begun with the Restoration. His sense of the values of things, his freedom from cant, his independence of character, his very prejudices, made broadly in the direction of individualism as against authority in criticism and thus prepared the way for the romantic reaction.

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The Prose Style of Dr. Samuel Johnson

The loaded style. According to Horace Walpole, one of the distinguishing marks of Johnson's works in prose is "the loaded style". This style cannot be called verbose, because verbosity generally implies meaningless verbiage, a criticism which Johnson does not deserve. Most of Johnson's words have an adequate, and frequently an illustrating, purpose, but his words are indiscriminately "select" and too forceful for ordinary occasions. They form a hardness of diction and a muscular toughness which destroy all ease and simplicity. Every sentence is highly coloured. He illustrates till he tires the reader. This fault is so usual with him that he is apt to explain the same thought by three different phrases heaped on each other. This three-fold inundation of parallel expressions is given by Walpole the label "triptology".

Preference for learned words. Johnson prefers learned words to the simple and common, and on every occasion. He is never simple, elegant, or light. This monotony, the grievous effect of pedantry and self-conceit, prevents him from ever being eloquent. He excites no passion but indignation; his writings send the reader away more satiated than pleased. If he attempts humour, he makes your reason smile, without making you gay, because the study, that his learned mirth demands, annihilates cheerfulness. On the whole, Johnson's style is so encumbered, so devoid of ear and harmony, and consequently so harsh that one cannot read Johnson's work aloud with much satisfaction.

Difficult and involved style. That Johnson's style is obscure, says Robert Burrowes, the testimony of all unlearned readers abundantly confirms. His style is a perpetual affectation of expressing his thoughts by the use of polysyllables of Latin derivation. From the writer of an English dictionary, there might reasonably be expected a nice selection of words, purely and radically English or at least the use of such only as had been unquestionably admitted into the language. But in this respect only disappointment and dismay await the reader. At his first perusal

of Johnson's writings in the *Rambler*, the reader finds himself bewildered in a labyrinth of long and learned words, distracted with foreign sounds, and exiled from his native speech, in perpetual want of an interpreter. Disgusted at the intrusion of so many phrases to which he has been hitherto a stranger, he labours out a passage through the palpable obscure and, when he at last gains the golden prize, laments that so much time should have been wasted in overcoming the unnecessary obstacles to its approach. This fault becomes glaring especially when ordinary subjects are treated by Johnson. Take a few examples: a calamity which will not admit being complained of is, in Johnson's language, such as "will not justify the acerbity of exclamation, or support the solemnity of vocal grief"; to deny and to profess, in Johnson's language, are to "pronounce the monosyllables of coldness and the sonorous periods of respectful profession": when the skillet is watched on the fire, we see it "simmer with the due degree of heat, and snatch it off at the moment of projection"; sunset is described by Johnson as "the gentle coruscations of declining day"; and for washing the face with exactness, we get the phrase "washing with oriental scrupulosity".

Love of substantives. Johnson shows an extraordinary love for the use of substantives. Indeed, he crowds his sentences with them. Frequently he substitutes them for other parts of speech; instead therefore of the usual construction, where the adjective agrees with the substantive, he forms a new substantive from the adjective which governs the other in the possessive case. Thus, instead of writing: "with as easy an approach", Johnson writes: "with the same facility of approach". Instead of writing: "with such lively turns, such elegant irony, and such severe sarcasm", he says, "with such vivacity of turn, such elegance of irony, and such asperity of sarcasm." This desire to denote everything by substantives has done considerable violence to his constructions: "places of little frequentation"; "circumstances of no elegant recital"; "with emulation of price"; "the library which is of late erection"; "too much temerity of conclusion"—these are expressions of affected and ungraceful harshness. This, however, is not the worst fault such constructions may have, for they often become unnecessarily obscure: as "he will continue the road by annual elongation", when the writer means: "he will cover, or travel over, some additional parts of the road each year."

Use of metaphors. Metaphorical expression is one of those arts of splendour which Johnson has most frequently employed. He has availed himself of all its advantages, and has escaped most of its concomitant faults. In his metaphors and similes the picture is always complete in itself, and some particulars of exact resemblance are distinctly impressed upon the reader. What image can be more beautiful than that which represents the beginnings of madness as "the variable weather of the mind, the flying vapours which from time to time cloud reason without eclipsing it?" And

what image can be more appropriate than that which describes Congreve's personages as "a sort of intellectual gladiators ?" Sometimes, indeed, it must be acknowledged, his metaphors succeed each other in too quick a succession, and are followed up too elaborately. Besides, some of his metaphors hardly serve the purpose of aiding the reader's understanding. "An intellectual digestion, which concocted the pulp of learning, but refused the husks". "An accumulation of knowledge impregnated his mind, fermented by study, and sublimed by imagination". Such illustrations are not very helpful to the reader.

Parallelism. One of the peculiarities of Johnson's style is the parallelism of his sentences. The very frequency of this characteristic tends to monotony. Besides, his parallel sentences are not always faultless in themselves. Sometimes, though indeed rarely, a word is used without a definitive appropriation to that to which it is annexed ; as in this instance : "Omnipotence cannot be exalted, infinity cannot be amplified, perfection cannot be improved", where the exact relation between amplitude and infinity, and between improvement and perfection, is not at all kept up by exaltation being applied to omnipotence. Sometimes two words are introduced, which answer hardly any other purpose than to make the parallelism more conspicuous, by adding a new member to each clause, as in the following passage : "grows too slothful for the labour of contest, too tender for the asperity of contradiction, and too delicate for the coarseness of truth", where labour, asperity, and coarseness are sufficiently implied in slothful, tender, and delicate. Sometimes too the parallelism itself is unnecessarily thrust on the reader, as "quickness of apprehension and celerity of reply", where "celerity" having precisely the same meaning as "quickness", has only been introduced to make up the parallelism. Similarly, in the sentence, "Nothing is far-sought or hard-laboured", the first adverb "far" is essential to the sense, and the second (hard) only to the sound. "When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather, they are in haste to tell each other what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm". Such uninteresting enumerations contribute nothing to the meaning. They could only have been intended to answer the purposes of harmony.

However, many of Johnson's parallelisms are altogether happy. He was most eminently qualified for anti-thesis. None has exceeded him in nicety of discernment, and no author's vocabulary has ever equalled his in a copious assortment of forcible and definite expressions. Thus, he compares Blackmore with Collier : "Blackmore's censure was cold and general, Collier's was personal and ardent : Blackmore taught his readers to dislike, but Collier incited them to abhor". Indeed, all his contrasts and comparisons possess the same high degree of accuracy and perfection.

Misplaced magniloquence. Johnson's prose style had an immense vogue for a time and it influenced most of the writers of his own and the following generation, even men so great as Gibbon and the young Ruskin, and women so brilliant as Fanny Burney. Then a reaction came and Johnson's style was generally denounced as pompous, empty, and verbose. His style is the exact opposite of Dryden's, of which he said that, having no prominent or discriminative characters, it could not easily be imitated either seriously or ludicrously. Johnson's style could be, and often was, imitated in both ways. Even in his life-time, when it was most admired, it was already parodied. Goldsmith once remarked to him : "Dr. Johnson, if you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like whales." That was the chief defect in Johnson's style. There is a good deal of misplaced magniloquence in his writings. The simple and natural thought gains nothing and loses much by this heavy pomp as, for instance, in the following sentence from *Rasselas* : "I have missed the endearing elegance of female friendship, and the happy commerce of domestic tenderness." There is an ill-timed elaboration of phrases in the following sentence in which Johnson merely wants to say that it is wrong and absurd to let our spirits depend on the weather : "To call upon the sun for peace and gaiety, or deprecate the clouds lest sorrow should overwhelm us, is the cowardice of idleness, and the idolatry of folly".

***Lives of the Poets* free from turgidity and pomposity.** It has thus to be admitted that Johnson is often turgid and pompous, often grandiose with an artificial and undesired grandiloquence. But this does not apply to Johnson's style as a whole. His last, longest, and most pleasant work, the *Lives of the Poets*, is almost free from this defect. In fact, it is possible to trace a kind of progress through his life as he gradually shook off these mannerisms, and began to write as easily as he talked. These mannerisms are most conspicuous in the *Rambler* and *Rasselas*. But even there, through all the heaviness, we get many suggestions of the trenchant force which marked his later style.

Pompous but not verbose. Johnson is frequently accused of "verbosity". Strictly speaking, this word means not pomposity, but the use of superfluous words adding nothing to the sense. Now Johnson is seldom guilty of "verbosity" as thus interpreted. There are many good writers, Scott, for instance, in whom we might frequently omit half a phrase without losing even a little bit of meaning. But we cannot do that with Johnson. Words that add neither information nor argument to what has gone before are extremely rare in him. Here is Johnson at his worst : "It is therefore to me a severe aggravation of a calamity, when it is such as in the common opinion will not justify the acerbity of exclamation, or support the solemnity of vocal grief." There could scarcely be heavier writing than this sentence. But every word here has a duty to do. The speaker of this sentence says that he is, like Sancho Panza, quite

unable to suffer in silence; and he adds that this makes many a misfortune harder for him to bear than it need be: for it may arise from an injury which other people think too trifling to justify any open expression of anger, or from an accident that may seem to them so petty that they will not endure any serious lamentation about it Johnson's way of saying this is "pompous" and rather absurd; but it is not "verbose". So when he says that he knows nothing of Mallet except "what is supplied by the unauthorised loquacity of common fame", it is possible to dislike the phrase; but it is not possible to deny that the words are as full of meaning as words can be.

A scholar's style. Johnson's style has both the merits and demerits of scholarship. Like a scholar, he seldom uses language which is either empty or inexact; but with the scholar's accuracy he has also the scholar's pride. On the whole, he could rarely bring himself to be "below refinement", the refinement not of the drawing-room but of the library. The dignity of literature was constantly in his mind as he wrote; and he did not always write the better for it. Books in his day and in his eyes were still rather solemn things to be kept above the linguistic level of conversation. It is true that he praised Shakespeare's comic dialogue for having its source in that kind of conversation which is "above grossness and below refinement", but his own style of writing had a conscious air of literature about it.

Memorable generalisations. Johnson's style, slow-moving though it may be, is constantly relieved by those brief and pregnant generalisations of which he is one of the greatest masters in the language. They are so close so life as all men know it, that the casual reader is apt to take them for platitudes. But there is all the difference between stale superficiality and the sayings of Johnson "heated to new energy in the fires of conscience, thought, and experience". A few examples will illustrate this point:

"Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed."

"To man is permitted the contemplation of the skies, but the practice of virtue is commanded."

"We will not endeavour to fix the destiny of kingdoms: it is our business to consider what beings like us may perform."

"The truth is that no mind is much employed upon the present: recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments."

"Marriage has many pains but celibacy has no pleasures."

"Envy is the only vice which is practicable at all times and in every place."

"No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library."

"I have always thought it the duty of an anonymous author to write as if he expected to be hereafter known."

"To do nothing is in every man's power : we can never want an opportunity of omitting duties."

Johnson's own view. Johnson himself expressed the following view of his style of writing : "I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations. Something perhaps I have added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence. When common words were less pleasing to the ear, or less distinct in their signification, I have familiarised the terms of philosophy* by applying them to popular ideas."

Attacks on his style. Johnson's claim to have added to the elegance and harmony of English prose would not have been admitted by most of his contemporaries. Even among his declared admirers there were many who regretted his fondness for long words and elaborate sentences. And there were harsher critics who condemned the Johnsonian style out of hand. In 1767, a critic denounced Johnson for the false glitter of his eloquence and the big tumour of his hard words. According to this critic, when another man would say : "Stand out of my light, while I put on my spectacles", Johnson would say : "But I obsecrate that in the interim you would, by a proper cessation, facilitate my enjoyment of the light whilst I, by the fortuitous liquefaction of spectacular lenses, and their concordant adaptation to my temporal regions, meliorate and prolong its fruition." Johnson was little troubled by such attacks, and is said to have remarked : "My other works are wine and water ; but my *Rambler* is pure wine." Nevertheless, when one of the numbers was read to him and he was asked what he thought of it, he shook his head and replied : "Too wordy".

Inversions, anti-theses, over-complication of the syntax. It is true that in the *Rambler* especially, Johnson avoids using any expression that could possibly be classed as "low", and he unduly uses difficult words (such as abscinded, adscititious, equiponderant, frigorifick, intenerate, and papilionaceous). Yet it is not the teeth-breaking diction, as Horace Walpole called it, that gives Johnson's style its special flavour, but rather the frequent inversion, the excessive use of parallelism and antithesis, and the over-complication of the syntax. Here is a sentence which shows some typical convolutions :

*In this context "terms of philosophy" include words that we would nowadays describe as technical or scientific.

"When a tiresome and vexatious journey of four days had brought me to the house, where invitation, regularly sent for seven years together, had at last induced me to pass the summer, I was surprised, after the civilities of my reception, to find, instead of the leisure and tranquillity, which a rural life always promises, and, if well-conducted, might always afford, a confused wildness of care, and a tumultuous hurry of diligence, by which every face was clouded, and every motion agitated."

The doublets here are characteristic of the *Rambler* : "tiresome and vexatious" ; "leisure and tranquillity." The triple parallel is also noteworthy : "a confused wildness of care", and "a tumultuous hurry of diligence."

Balance in his style. The use of balance in Johnson's style is not merely a structural element, but is bound up with the nature of the thought. Commenting on Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*, Hazlitt said . "Another circumstance which led to Dr. Johnson's indiscriminate praise or censure of Shakespeare, is the very structure of his style. Johnson wrote a kind of rhyming prose, in which he was as much compelled to finish the different clauses of his sentences, and to balance one period against another, as the writer of heroic verse is to keep to lines of ten syllables with similar terminations. He no sooner acknowledges the merits of his author in one line than the periodical revolution in his style carries the weight of his opinion completely over to the side of objection, thus keeping up a perpetual alternation of perfections and absurdities." But Hazlitt is confusing cause and effect. The idiosyncrasy of the style does not control, but rather reflects, the working of Johnson's mind—the deliberate marshalling of evidence on this side and on that, the movement from the particular to the general, the contrasting and balancing, the judicial summing up. The success of such a style must largely depend upon intellectual content. If the thought is superficial, the structure is sure to sag : this happens sometimes in Johnson's writings, but more often in those of his imitators.

Historical back ground of his style. The historical background of Johnson's style is important. In the seventeenth century the intricate harmonies of Sir Thomas Browne, John Milton, and Jeremy Taylor had been succeeded by the conversational tones of Dryden, of whose prefaces Johnson wrote : "They have not the formality of a settled style, in which the first half of the sentence betrays the other. The clauses are never balanced, nor the periods modelled ; every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls into its proper place." Dryden was followed in the early eighteenth century by Swift and Addison, the masters of what Johnson called "the middle style." But before the century was half way through, it became clear that the pendulum was swinging once again. The plain style in its turn was falling out of fashion, and in Bolingbroke's writings, for example, conversation had already

given place to oratory. When Johnson applied himself to the reform of English prose, he was not creating something new, but merely working up and standardising a manner which was already in the air. In had often been said that he was harking back to earlier writers such as Browne. To say so is to disregard not only the sound of Johnson's own style but also Johnson's opinion of Browne's style. He thought Browne's style to be vigorous but rugged, learned but pedantic, deep but obscure, and so on.

Occasional bursts of eloquence. Even had he wished, Johnson could not have reproduced the colour, the harmony, the sweeping movement of the seventeenth century masters of English prose. He certainly helped to revive the rhythmical character of English prose, but the means by which he obtained his own characteristic rhythm were often carried to such lengths as to make his sentences stiff and mechanical. He was capable of short bursts of eloquence, as in the following passage from an essay on revenge:

"Of him that hopes to be forgiven, it is indispensably required that he forgives. It is therefore superfluous to urge any other motive. On this great duty eternity is suspended, and to him that refuses to practise it the throne of mercy is inaccessible, and the Saviour of the world has been born in vain."

Even here the noble effect springs rather from the thought than from the cadence, and we have only to imagine what Jeremy Taylor would have made of it to realise that Johnson's ear was not extremely sensitive. Nor did he articulate his periods and paragraphs in such a way that each successive portion should seem to rise inevitably out of the last. He could write magnificently for a brief space under the stress of feeling. His less formal prose, as in the *Lives of the Poets*, could be admirably trenchant. But as a writer in the grand manner he never mastered the essential art of continuity. He cannot therefore be ranked among the greatest prose stylists in English.

Johnson inspired many parodists and innumerable serious imitators. His influence lasted well over half a century, with mixed results. On the one hand, the *Rambler* popularised a style which degenerated into such nerveless verbosity as the later manner of Fanny Burney*. On the credit side is the illustrious prose of Edward Gibbon's famous work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which derived at least its framework from Johnson. Moreover, the discipline that Johnson imposed upon the English sentence

*This is how she wrote in defence of her father's second marriage: "Those who judge of the sincerity of pristine connubial tenderness merely by its abhorrence of succession, take a very unenlightened, if not false, view of human grief; unless they limit their stigma to an eager or facile repetition of those rites which, on their first inauguration, had seemed inviolable and irreplaceable."

cleared the way for what has been called the standard Georgian style, of which Southey was perhaps the best exponent. Johnson was the favourite moral author of Jane Austen some of whose best ironies are often delicate echoes of him.

"Masculine directness". Certain mannerisms* are unmistakable in Johnson's prose style which had considerable authority once but which now seems to have lost much of its appeal. Johnson's sentences seem to be contorted, as his huge limbs used to twitch, by a kind of mechanical spasmodic action. The most obvious peculiarity is the tendency, which he himself noticed, to "use too big words and too many of them." He explained to Miss Reynolds that Shakespeare's line "You must borrow me Garagantua's mouth†", had been applied to him because he used big words which required the mouth of a giant to pronounce them. It was not, however, the mere bigness of the words that distinguished his style, but a peculiar love of putting the abstract for the concrete, of using awkward inversions, and of balancing his sentences in a monotonous rhythm. But, with all its faults, this style has the merits of masculine directness. The inversions are not such as to complicate the construction. As Boswell remarks, he never uses a parenthesis ; and his style, though ponderous and wearisome, is as transparent as the smarter snip-snap of Macaulay.

His singular mannerism appears in his earliest writings. It is most marked during the time of the *Rambler*. But in the *Lives of the Poets*, although the trick of inversion has become commoner, the other peculiarities have been so far softened as to be inoffensive.

His style characteristic of the individual and of the epoch Johnson's style is characteristic of the individual and of the epoch. The preceding generation had exhibited the final triumph of common sense over the pedantry of a decaying scholasticism. Simplicity, clearness, directness were therefore the great virtues of thought and style. Berkeley, Addison, Pope, and Swift were the great models of such excellence in various departments of literature. In the succeeding generation we become aware of a certain beginning of dissatisfaction with the aesthetic and intellectual code that prevailed. The supremacy of common sense, the great importance of clearness, is still fully acknowledged, but there is a growing undertone of dissent in form and substance. Although Addison is still a kind of sacred model, the best prose-writers are beginning to aim at a more complex structure of sentences, fitted for the expression of a wider range of thought and emotion. Johnson, though no conscious revolutionist, shares this growing discontent. He was

*The word "mannerism" here means the repetition of certain forms of language in obedience to blind habit and without reference to their appropriateness in particular cases.

†This line occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*.

not a systematic student of the English literature of the preceding centuries, but he had a strong affection for some of its chief masterpieces. He was perhaps attracted by both Richard Burton and Sir Thomas Browne. He never seems to have directly imitated anyone, but it is probable that he felt a closer affinity to these old scholars, with their elaborate and ornate language and their deep and solemn tone of sentiment, than to the brilliant but comparatively superficial writers of Queen Anne's time. Accordingly his style acquired something of the old elaboration, though the attempt to conform to the canons of a later age renders the structure disagreeably monotonous. His tendency to pomposity is not redeemed by the naivete and spontaneity of his masters.

Saintsbury's view. This is how George Saintsbury comments on Dr. Johnson's prose style which is sometimes referred to as Johnsonese and which Goldsmith wittily called the "great-whale" style: "His means may not have been perfect. His Latinising (not improbably helped by some early work of his on Sir Thomas Browne), his somewhat ponderous swing of balanced phrase, his too mechanical antithesis, lie open to much easy ridicule and to some just censure. But even his more pompous and rhetorical style has nobility and dignity, while the vigorous conversational directness which he always maintained in speech, and by no means neglected wholly in writing, served to preserve it from mere stilted bombast. And as this characteristic pervades all his prose work, all his prose work possesses, and to the true historic judgment will always retain, interest and value accordingly."

Saintsbury tells us of the alternate dangers of the alternate fashions of prose. The ornate and fanciful style tends to the florid and the extravagant, and needs to be restrained and tamed. The plain style tends to the slipshod and jejune, and needs to be raised and inspired. During the prevalence of the latter, Addison and Swift came to its rescue from the mere colloquialism which distinguished writers like L'Estrange. So Johnson later came to its rescue (as in different ways did Gibbon and Burke) from the jejuneness and lack of colour which distinguished writers like Middleton.

Conclusion. The *Rambler* essays show, perhaps more saliently than any other of Johnson's writings, those peculiarities which have made its style a by-word for ponderosity. The diction involves a large proportion of Latin words, perhaps because Johnson was then at work on his *Dictionary* and used the *Rambler* as an opportunity for the use of words which had grown stiff from long disuse. Moreover, Johnson doubles epithets, adds illustrations, develops, expands, modifies, balances, repeats, and exhausts the idea before he quits it. His sentences are thus complicated and weighty, full of inversions, depending much on rhetorical artifices such as antithesis and climax. But this elaborate manner is not always out of place. It occasionally gives to Johnson's writing a sombre

and splendid eloquence, as in the opening passage of *Rasselas*. Moreover, he could be simple and colloquial when he chose; and his later works, possibly because they were written more hurriedly, are much more terse and rapid. In general, Johnson's influence on English style was a good one. While he confirmed the tradition of order, correctness, and lucidity, which had begun with Dryden, he introduced a greater variety of effect, a more complex sentence-structure, and a more copious diction. He showed how, even within the rules of composition defined in practice by Dryden and Addison, the richness and variety of Elizabethan prose might be attempted.

"The Latin element is at its greatest in the *Rambler*. He was then engaged on his *Dictionary*. But he always tended to use long words most when he wrote in haste: and his revision was towards simplicity. He used them in conversation, where alone he allowed himself the liberty of a daring coinage. They were in no sense an embroidery, but part of the very texture of his thought. Difference of thoughts, he said, will produce difference of language. He that thinks with more extent than another will want words of larger meaning; he that thinks with subtlety will seek for terms of more nice discrimination. As we read him and accustom our minds to move with his, we cease to notice the diction. The strength of his thought carries the weight of his words. His meaning is never mistaken, though it may not be fully grasped at a glance; for he puts much in small compass, and the precision of his language requires careful reading for its just appreciation. Familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious; 'vanity produced a grotto where necessity enforced a passage'—could the thought be put more pointedly, or adequately, or shortly."

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Lives of the English Poets

I

The *Lives of the English Poets* (1779—81) is a collection of fifty-two literary biographies. This work is a fitting climax to the career of Johnson, who may be regarded as the first great scholar-critic in English literature. Johnson was sixty-eight when he began work on the *Lives* but it is beyond all dispute his most brilliant achievement. Boswell called it "the richest, most beautiful, and indeed most perfect production of Johnson's pen." The word "perfect" is certainly not appropriate here because there is a good deal in this work which is formula-ridden and inconclusive.

The structure of the *Lives* is a tripartite one: biography, character, and criticism. Every Life begins with a severely chronological account of the biographical facts of the poet—ancestry, birth, education, and so on. The second section, always the shortest, is a brief character-sketch of the poet—his appearance and temperament. The third is purely critical, and usually neither too long nor too short. Digressions do enter but, on the whole, the tripartite structure is rigidly maintained. There is a total absence of connecting passages between the two major sections, the biographical and the critical. The character-section, for instance, could have been used as a link, but Johnson makes no effort to use it as such.

It might be imagined that in this work Johnson is creating the foundations of the 19th century school of historical criticism by elevating the literary life to a new critical importance. But Johnson is not a very biographical critic. His point of departure is no doubt in the poet's life, but he makes little attempt to exploit biography for critical purposes. He seems simply indifferent to what was a paradox for him, namely that Milton, with his marked republican sentiments, should have written the greatest of the English epics, and he evades this issue in a few dismissive phrases. His treatment of Gray also shows the opportunities he missed. The biography shows Gray living the life of a Cambridge scholar; the character-section reports him to be "the most learned man in

Europe"; and then Johnson goes on to rebuke him for his unscholarly *Ode on Spring*. That the virtues and failings of Gray's poems might be more closely defined by using the biographical material he has himself just stated does not occur to Johnson. Those, who want criticism to remain free of biography, will complain that Johnson is largely biographical. Those who believe in the critical relevance of some biographical facts will complain that Johnson uses his facts too little.

Johnson is thus not at all a biographical critic in a manner that would anticipate Sainte-Beuve*. He is rather a critic who finds that criticism may be used as an appendage to biography. His interest in biography, like Dryden's before him, is moral and cautionary.

The Life of Milton is the supreme example of the excellence and the failure of Johnson's historical sense. Its design follows the usual structure—biography, character, and criticism—except that the middle section contains some oddly irrelevant material, including an account of Milton's family. Johnson attacks Milton's political views to the point of personal vindictiveness. A similar hostility pervades the early passages in the critical section: the short poems are condemned for their "repulsive harshness", *Lycidas* being especially denounced. Surprising as it may seem, however, Johnson's critique of *Paradise Lost* is laudatory even though the praise offered to it seems to come not from conviction but from what in his *Preface* to Shakespeare he had called "prescriptive veneration" due to works of established reputation. This critique is evidence of Johnson's great powers as an analyst, though his analysis is an act of self-persuasion. Various unconvincing and unconvinced reasons are advanced by him to justify Milton's epic being praised, until at last we are made to feel that Johnson was determined, both as a patriot, and a Christian, to assert a judgment he did not feel. To lessen the reputation of Milton would, he confesses, be to diminish in some degree the honour of his country. The essential ambiguity of the Victorian attitude to Milton—one of bored and disingenuous reverence—is sufficiently represented by Johnson's pronouncements. As in the *Preface* to Shakespeare, Johnson has not played quite fair with us in this case.

The Life of Milton shows Johnson uncomfortably poised upon a double contradiction: he respects Milton's poetry more than he respects Milton, and he respects that poetry without loving it. The Life of Cowley, for all the notoriety of Johnson's attack upon the Metaphysical style, is a happier example of his genius for distinction. The nature of the Metaphysical achievement is in large part clearly defined, whatever we may think of Johnson's view of it:

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*Sainte-Beuve: a great French critic (1804-1869). (He was the first in France to break away from classical dogmas).

"The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions: their learning instructs, and their subtility (or, subtlety) surprises..."

This is an admirable account, in general terms, of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets.*

But the *Lives* are essentially a study of the Augustan mode in English poetry, and the Lives of Dryden and Pope are its real highlights. In these two cases the greatest of the English neo-classical critics finds his own level, and he speaks what he knows and loves. To read these two Lives is to realise how uncongenial was the task he had to perform in the *Preface* to Shakespeare and in the Life of Milton. With them, his best effort was to justify and excuse; with Dryden and Pope, he is no longer on the defensive. Of Dryden and Pope, he is the advocate; at times, he is almost the mouthpiece. In Johnson's criticism, Dryden and Pope and other Augustan poets found the most perfect of exponents. It might even be said that, in the case of Pope, Johnson's enthusiasm over-rides discrimination. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the most rapturous paragraphs, such as those that conclude the critical section of the Life of Pope, are always balanced by a hint of disapproval. In any case, his enthusiasm for Dryden and Pope is limited to their technical achievement. He is not much impressed by their attitudes to life. They "reformed our numbers"—but the "metaphysical morality" of Pope's *Essay on Man* is ruthlessly condemned: "Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised." Dryden purified the diction and the versification; but *The Hind and the Panther* is based on a fable "full of absurdity"; and though *Absalom and Achitophel* possesses various excellences as a political poem, yet its construction is beyond repair. Indeed, in the Lives of Dryden and Pope, a sound critical balance has been maintained.

II

His *Lives of the Poets* is the most companionable of all Johnson's works. His prose is at its easiest here, and the work has a pleasant informality. The short biographies form as a whole a vivid and sympathetic account of the literary life of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here and there they are enriched by personal reminiscence: "Such was the fate of Collins, with whom I once delighted to converse, and whom I yet remember with tenderness." Sometimes the reminiscence is at second-hand, as when he writes of Dryden's masterpiece, *Absalom and Achitophel*, that its reception "was eager, and the sale so large, that my father, an old bookseller, told me, he had not known it equalled but by Sacheverell's trial." The narrative does equal justice to the oddities and the tragedies of life.

On the critical side there are many pronouncements which may not be acceptable to us, for example, his view of sacred poetry: "Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical." This judgment would exclude Donne, Vaughan, and Herbert from the domain of poetry. We may feel startled by his opinion of *Chevy Chase* in which, he says, "there is a chill and lifeless imbecility", and the story in which is, according to him, told in a most ineffective manner. This is the opinion of Johnson about the old song of Percy and Douglas, which Addison praised for its simple majesty, and which warmed the heart of Sir Philip Sidney like the sound of a trumpet! It would seem also that Johnson's judgment of the works of Swift and Milton is prejudiced by the indecency of one and the Republicanism of the other. His attitude to pastoral poetry is shocking when we find how roughly he expresses his distaste for *Lycidas*, "of which the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing". Lytton Strachey said that Johnson's aesthetic judgments have always some good quality except one: they are never right. But we feel so often impressed, if not convinced, by the weight and lucidity of Johnson's arguments that we begin to wonder whether it is at all possible to class any critical opinion as right or wrong.

Although it is only by an unreasonable over-simplification that any great critic can be classified as being classical, neo-classical, or romantic; it is convenient to describe one aspect at least of Johnson's criticism as neo-classical. For example, he praises Dyer's *Grongar Hill* because the poet's reflections are "consonant to the general sense or experience of mankind", and he objects to the metaphysical poets because they have "no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and the pleasure of other minds". Like most of his contemporaries, Johnson assumes the existence of a central body of critical doctrine having a general validity. When we regard Johnson as "wrong", it is often because he applies the neo-classical rules which Coleridge afterwards did his utmost to discredit. But there are two personal factors which have diminished the value of Johnson's critical work.

The first of these factors in his unawareness of the subtler rhythms of the English language. He dismissed the songs in *Comus* as "not very musical in their numbers." He denied the melodic variety of the Spenserian stanza. And he failed to appreciate the wonderful prose of Swift in which a wealth of indignation, irony, and humour is conveyed with such deceptive ease. The second factor is Johnson's massive rationality which is at once a strength and a weakness. There was a preponderance in his character of reason, and he had very little of "sensibility". He had a strong belief in the validity of intellectual criticism. He defined poetic genius as "that quality without which judgment is cold and know-

ledge is inert; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates." This is nicely said, and it might be happily applied to the prose of a writer like Edmund Burke; but it tells us little about poetry as distinguished from prose. "One power alone makes a poet", says Blake, "imagination, the divine vision." The difference between Johnson and Blake in their approach to poetry is obvious.

In Johnson's view, "inherent improbability" is a greater defect in a poem than lack of vision. We cannot imagine him looking at a view through "magic casements", or rejoicing in "the light that never was on sea or land". He prefers the heroic and the didactic to the lyrical strain. He is deaf to the poetry of *Lycidas*. He can write a substantial essay on Edmund Waller without quoting the poem *Go, Lovely Rose*. In short, he seems responsive to almost every aspect of poetry except the poetic element itself.

But the *Lives of the Poets* is a work with its own critical excellences. Even Lytton Strachey, who said that Johnson had neither ear nor imagination, speaks with enthusiasm of Johnson's keen sense of actuality, his combined command of sanity and paradox, and his firm independence of thought. Whatever point Johnson makes, he makes once and for all; we shall never find it more precisely or more cogently expressed anywhere else. His prejudices are often so obvious and so endearing that we can laugh affectionately and apply the necessary correction. And when that has been done, and when due allowance has been made for the eighteenth century background, we may not find ourselves in disagreement with him after all. Finally, he enhances our pleasure by his gusto, and at the same time forces us to be for ever testing our own opinions. He teaches us to be suspicious of "the cant of those who judge by principles rather than perception." He never lets us forget that "the purpose of a writer is to be read, and the criticism which would destroy the power of pleasing must be blown aside."

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6

Dr. Johnson as a Literary Critic

The inner sources of Johnson's literary doctrine may, according to a literary historian, be stated as follows : (*i*) a rational attitude of mind, without excess or system, more empirical yet than logical ; (*ii*) conservative tendencies ; (*iii*) the sincerity of a personal judgment that has revised for itself all time-honoured admirations, and has almost always found new reasons to approve of them ; and (*iv*) religious and moral needs that find their satisfaction in an austere philosophy of life. Johnson was not in the least romantic, but he had a troubled, if not divided, soul. A narrow but deep sensibility lay hidden beneath his rough exterior. A certain amount of emotion had entered into his rationalism. And yet he was the enemy of sentimentalism. A man of dictatorial views, he yet clung to all that was sure, tested, and verified. He felt a craving for the happy mean, and detested extremes in everything. His own instinct for a moral code approved a code in art which, however, he enriched, broadened to a certain extent, and made more flexible. His scale of literary volues was not quite the same as that of Pope ; he differed from him in his estimate of Shakespeare whom he felt and appreciated more intimately. But his own code in return acquired a dogmatic character ; and it became hardened against all threat of a change. He showed an unconquerable distrust of any innovation in literature. The principles of the art of writing remained the same for him as when they were formulated by the masters of modern classicism, after the model of the ancients. As for the signs of unrest, and the initiatives which were em rging around him, he either ignored or condemned them. He looked upon the heroic couplet as the highest form of verse. Rhyme, he said, was indispensable to poetry. To imitate the Spenserian stanza was, in his opinion, but a futile whim. When confronted by the growing popularity of scenic description, of "Nature", he showed only indifference amounting to disregard. Thus classicism now became a dogma, kept alive through its connection with the moral and social needs of authority, order, and tradition, rather than through the direct and simple demands of aesthetic taste.

Johnson's most solid claim to reputation rests today on his critical studies, besides an allegorical novel, *Rasselas*. The critical

studies are his *Preface* to Shakespeare and the *Lives of the Poets*. Johnson's judgment of Shakespeare marks a date in the history of criticism. The value of his opinions here rests not only on the massive strength, the sure penetrating power of a perception which probes to the very core of Shakespeare's art, and shows up its deep humanity, its sovereign realism : for this perception, admirably accurate as a whole, is not devoid of some errors of vision when it comes to details. Johnson sees Shakespeare through his own pre-conceived opinions and grievances ; and the reservations which he makes are proof of this. His taste is not a little shocked by the dramatic daring of the author of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Shakespeare, in his opinion, succeeded much better in comedy than in tragedy. Another charge is that these plays are evidence of a shocking indifference to moral justice. Shakespeare's anachronisms are disconcerting, his rhetoric cold and forced ; and lastly, he cannot resist the fatal attraction of quibbles. In this way Johnson emphasises fairly well the points in which Shakespeare's aesthetics differ from those of his own time ; and even if most of his remarks are justified, and on the other hand if his positive appreciation is wholly animated by a warm sympathy, it can be said that this judgment remains essentially dogmatic ; in no way does it depart from the point of view of classicism.

But Johnson broadens this point of view to a remarkable extent. He renews the classical doctrine with an appeal to inner observation and to the resources of literary psychology. By interweaving comedy and tragedy did Shakespeare commit an unpardonable fault, as orthodox criticism would have us believe ? Is not this mixed art, after all in keeping with the varied character of all experience ? It is unpleasant in logic to be shifted from one emotional tone to another, from tragic to comic, and from comic to tragic, in the same composition. But it might, in actual fact, be restful for the needs of consciousness. Dryden had already sketched out an argument of this kind, but Johnson carries his analysis and demonstration still further. He goes on to attack the rule of the three unities. This rule fades away when examined closely in the light of experimental data. The origin of this rule is in the imaginary fear of a disquietude of mind, he says. The unity of action alone is justified. The unities of time and place are, in his view, the results of an abstract notion of theatrical illusion. This illusion is never complete ; were it so, it would destroy the very conditions of art. The fictitious change from one place to another or from one time to another does not demand more from the audience than that general goodwill without which no dramatic performance is possible. In this matter, again, Dryden's hesitant intuition is improved upon ; and the Romantic theory of freedom finds itself wholly involved.

This theory is to be felt everywhere behind the strong positions which Johnson adopts by virtue of his classicism. In the back-

ground of his ideas, we perceive a faint feeling that a vast and universal renovation is called for. We can observe a hint of irony in his praise of a "regular and correct" writer. He describes the bright exuberance of Shakespeare in glowing terms, and he speaks wistfully of the ages of youthfulness and freshness when literature relied upon pure observation and owed nothing yet to books. Johnson is the high priest of the classical faith and of a rational art, but we also find in him a yearning for another art and for another psychological tone. In his sub-conscious mind, he shares in the mental change* taking place among his contemporaries.

This secret movement of Johnson's thought, which is shifting towards the future, is less obvious in the *Lives of the Poets*. But these short compact memoirs are frequently little masterpieces. Johnson approaches his task as a psychologist, and here again in a broad sense as a moralist no less than as a critic. Besides the main figures, there pass before our eyes the minor ones, poets of noble birth or penniless men of letters. Johnson distributes praise and blame among them with an equal conscientiousness. His style is one of sententious gravity lightened by humour. His measure of literary merit is impartial. His attitude is firm, decided, and almost dogmatic. But he tolerates the individual variations of temperament, even if he does not always show the same degree of sympathy to all. His judgment is not only formal, but human. He assesses the significance of life at its full value, tracing back the work to the man. In this analysis, he shows divination and tact, but also a certain Puritan narrowness. His mind is equipped with a kind of supple relativism, lying within a rigid framework of certitudes which seem to us today somewhat arbitrary. Finally, he goes straight to the essentials. He seizes the kernels of ideas or of moral substance in the works, and bases his estimates upon this inner element.

He therefore appreciates the poets from the standpoint of the moralist and the philosopher. He also appreciates them, to a certain extent, from the standpoint of the artist. He shows a fine sense of the relationship between form and content, and he feels and judges form in most cases with felicity and sureness. He certainly attaches great importance to construction, to harmony of tone, to transitions, to all the technique of classicism. But he also shows an accurate sense of other and more subtle elements. He recognises the charm, the evocative power, the music, the pure beauty of the verse or of the image. He gives evidence of a creative intuition. But this faculty, which makes him a great critic, has its limits. He is unable to tolerate certain audacities that are too new for him. His taste is offended by certain innovations that are too personal. He is unjust in his criticism of Swift whose harsh

*This change refers to the romantic vein that begins to manifest itself in English literature after the middle of the eighteenth century.

sweeping manner secretly worries him. He judgment of Gray and Collins is lacking in kindliness. He cannot foresee the coming of Romanticism But he gives a more solid reality to the classical criteria of merits by his full awareness of spiritual energies. And his observations are made in a style of dense force, rich in formulae, antithetic and often epigrammatic, but never to excess : a trifle solemn, stiff, oracular, but always saved from banality or turgidness.

The influence of Johnson has been social and moral just as much as literary. He has definitely fixed the type of the modern man of letters, and given him the dignity of independence. His famous letter to Lord Chesterfield proclaims the end of the age of patrons. As a personal authority on literature and manners, and a critic of standing, he contributes to order and stability in a period that is secretly in the throes of a vast transition already begun. His decrees maintain and justify the valuations of the past, even if they be prompted by new reasons.

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W. Wordsw. 1770–1850 = 80
Dalton 1771–1855 = 84
Coleridge 1772–1834 = 72
Keats 1795–1821 = 26
Shelley 1792–1822 = 30
Byron 1788–1824 = 36

7

Dr. Johnson's Preface to his Edition of the Plays of William Shakespeare (1765)

A DETAILED ANALYSIS

SHAKESPEARE'S APPEAL THROUGH THE AGES

Reverence paid to antiquity. Some people complain that praises are showered without reason on dead authors. These people feel that the fact of antiquity serves as a basis for admiring a writer without much regard to the quality of his work. There is no doubt that ancient authors become the object of veneration chiefly by virtue of their antiquity and not by virtue of the excellence of their performance which alone deserves recognition. Criticism generally finds fault with living authors and gives praise to those who are dead and those who lived long ago. **(Paragraphs 1—2)**

Continued regard and esteem, a sign of greatness. However, it has to be admitted that the excellence of an author can be judged by applying this test : Has that author enjoyed the regard and esteem of readers and critics through the centuries ? If the literary work of an author has won the admiration of people during successive periods of literary history, that author must be recognised to be great. After all it is only by comparing his works with the works of authors of established repute and thus discovering his merits that the people of successive ages have been giving him their respect. "In the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind." For instance, the comparison of an author with an established classic like Homer will enable us to determine the degree of the excellence of that author. Homer is so great that nation after nation, and century after century, has emulated his works. The reverence that is paid to writings which have endured for centuries is thus due not to any blind confidence in them or to a superstitious belief in the superior wisdom of past ages. It is due to the fact that these writings have stood the scrutiny of time.

(Paragraphs 3—4)

Shakespeare's appeal remains undiminished. Shakespeare has by now acquired the dignity of an ancient author. He now claims the honour of established fame and veneration. He has been judged by time and been found to be great. The appeal of whatever was local or temporary in his work has long ceased to sway the judgment of readers. Nor have his personal relations with people of the time—his friendships and his enmities—anything to do with the subsequent judgment of his work. If he has been recognised and respected beyond the century in which he lived, it is because of the inherent value of his work and not because of any ephemeral considerations relating to his own period. His works have passed through many variations of taste and changes of manners, but their interest and their appeal have not diminised or declined with the passage of time. **(Paragraph 5)**

Inquiry into Shakespeare's excellences is necessary. And yet human judgment can never be regarded as infallible. The praise given to an author through the ages may yet be due largely to a prejudice in his favour or to the whim of fashion. It is therefore necessary to inquire into those excellences which have been responsible for maintaining the fame of Shakespeare among his countrymen over such a long period of time. **(Paragraph 6)**

SHAKESPEARE'S EXCELLENCES

Shakespeare's plays offer faithful pictures of real life. His characters have a universal appeal. A faithful representation of actuality is a source of pleasure to many people, and such a representation continues to give pleasure. What is wonderful or something out of the ordinary does not please for a long time. What is based on truth, however, can be a source of enduring pleasure. Shakespeare is, more than any other modern writer, the poet of nature. He "holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." His characters are not to be identified by any local customs unknown to the rest of the world, or by peculiarities understood by small numbers of readers. Nor are they to be identified by the effects on readers of what is transient and temporary. His characters are the authentic product of common humanity. They are such as the world will always produce, and observation will always find. In other words, Shakespeare's characters have a universal appeal. They act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles which are experienced by all mankind. A character portrayed by Shakespeare is not generally an individual but a species. **(Paragraphs 7—8)**

Shakespeare's greatness does not rest upon individual passages. It is because of this universality in the portrayal of characters that Shakespeare's plays are full of "practical axioms

and domestic wisdom." From Shakespeare's works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence. Yet his distinction lies not in the splendour of particular passages but in the progress of his story and the tenor of his dialogue. Selected quotations or passages from his plays can never give a reader a correct idea of Shakespeare's real greatness. **(Paragraph 9)**

The dialogue in his plays is based on the actual conversation of people. Shakespeare's dialogue is thoroughly realistic. The theatre mostly offers characters the like of whom have never been seen in real life, who converse in a language which is never heard in the daily business of our life, and who talk about subjects which never arise in day-to-day life. But the dialogue in Shakespeare's plays is often determined by the incident which produces it. His dialogue is pursued with much ease and simplicity. And it seems to have been taken from the common conversation of human beings. **(Paragraph 10)**

He does not over-emphasize the theme of love. Dramatists in general give an excessive importance to the theme of love in their plays. A play will centre round a lover, a lady, and a rival, and the entanglement in their mutual relations. In developing this theme of love and the passions it gives rise to, a dramatist will often violate probability, misrepresent life, and distort the language. It is not realised that love is only one of many passions of mankind, and that its influence on the totality of life is extremely limited. Shakespeare, however, understood this fact. He does not therefore give undue prominence to the passion of love and exhibits only what he saw in real life. He knew also that any passion was a cause of happiness if kept under check and a cause of disaster if it was allowed to become excessive. **(Paragraph 11)**

Every character is distinctly individualized. No poet ever kept his characters more distinct from each other than Shakespeare does. Pope was not strictly right in saying that every speech in a play by Shakespeare may be assigned to the proper speaker. Often Shakespeare's characters make speeches which are not characteristic of them. But it would be true to say that no speech made by a character can be properly transferred to some other character. In other words, there is no blurring of characters. No character shades off into another. **(Paragraph 12)**

A realistic and convincing portrayal of human nature. The characterisation in the plays of other dramatists is often extravagant and exaggerated, so that the reader cannot form correct ideas of human nature. Shakespeare, however is different. He has no heroes. He does not depict persons of either fabulous excellence or unexampled depravity. The speakers in his plays are men who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on a particular occasion. Even where the

agency is supernatural, the dialogue accords with real life. Shakespeare does not disguise the natural passions and the natural incidents. He "approximates the remote and familiarises the wonderful." The event which he represents may be impossible. But, if it were possible, its consequences would probably be such as he has depicted. Furthermore, he has shown human nature not only as it acts in real situations but as it would be found in situations which may never arise. **(Paragraph 13)**

His drama the mirror of life. Shakespeare, then, deserves praise because "his drama is the mirror of life". His characters express human sentiments in human language in situations derived from real life. By reading his scenes, a person, who does not live in the world, can form a fair idea of what the world is like. By reading his senses, a confessor, whose function it is to listen to men's confessions of their sins, can predict the progress of the passions. **(Paragraph 14)**

Some objections answered. Some critics have found fault with Shakespeare in this context. Dennis and Rymer think that the Roman characters in his plays are not sufficiently Roman. Voltaire complained that the kings in Shakespeare's plays did not behave completely as kings. Dennis was displeased because Menenius*, a Roman senator, behaved like a buffoon. Voltaire was displeased because the Danish usurper† in *Hamlet* had been represented as a drunkard. But Shakespeare always made nature predominate over accident. If he preserved the essential character, he did not bother much about the accidental distinctions. He knew that Rome, like every other city, had men of all dispositions. Wanting to depict a buffoon, he selected one from amongst the members of the Roman senate. Again, he wanted to show a usurper and murderer not only as odious but despicable. He therefore added drunkenness to the other characteristics of the man, because kings love wine like other men. The objections raised by the above-named critics are therefore examples of petty-minded criticism.

(Paragraph 15)

A defence of Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic elements. Shakespeare has also been criticised for his mingling of the comic and tragic elements in his plays. This charge deserves careful examination. The plays of Shakespeare are not, strictly speaking, either tragedies or comedies. His plays depict real human nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled in various degrees and endless combinations. His plays show the course of the world, in which the loss of one man is the gain of another, in which the reveller is hurrying to his wine and the mourner to a funeral, in which the malice of one is sometimes exceeded by the gaiety of another, and in

*Menenius is a character in *Coriolanus*.

†The Danish usurper is King Claudius, the uncle of Hamlet.

which many good and bad actions are done and prevented without design. Out of this medley of mingled purposes and chance happenings the ancient poets had made a selection, some choosing the crimes of men, and some the absurdities of men; some choosing the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter incidents; some choosing the terrors of distress, and some the the joys of prosperity. Thus arose the two kinds of dramatic writing, known as tragedy and comedy. But not a single Greek or Roman author attempted writing both these kinds either in separate plays or in the same composition.* Shakespeare, however, is a dramatist who possesses the power to fill us with sorrow and also to excite our laughter. And he is a dramatist who shows this two-fold apacity not in separate plays but together in play after play. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and comic characters, with the result that they sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes laughter. (**Paragraph 16—19**)

Appeal from rules of criticism to the reality of life. Shakespeare's practice in mingling the comic and tragic elements in the same play is contrary to the *rules* of dramatic writing. But rules are not more important than the claims of realism: "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature". The object of literature is to give instruction by pleasing the reader. A play, in whith the comic and the tragic have been mingled, is capable of conveying all the instruction that tragedy or comedy aims at, because such a play is closer to the reality of life than either pure tragedy or pure comedy. Nor is it true to say that by this change of scenes the passions are interrupted in their progress and that the principal event cannot attain its maximum power to move the reader. The mingling of tragic and comic scenes does not diminish or weaken the vicissitudes of passion that the dramatist aims at. Many people welcome comic relief after a scene producing the feeling of melancholy. Furthermore, variety on the whole contributes to pleasure. (**Paragraphs 20—21**)

The artificial classification of Shakespeare's plays. The division of Shakespeare's plays into comedies, tragedies and histories is not based on any exact or definite ideas of such labels. A comedy has generally been regarded as a play with a happy ending, no matter how distressing the incidents of the plot in general may be. A play is classified as a tragedy if it has a tragic ending, no matter how light some of the scenes in the course of its plot may be. A historical play is believed to be one that depicts a series of actions in a chronological order. It is not always very exactly distinguished from tragedy No matter what the label applied to a particular play of Shakespeare, his mode of composition is the same: there is a mingling of serious and merry scenes. And he always succeeds in

*In other words, he who wrote tragic plays did not write any comic plays, and *vice versa*. Nor did any author mingle tragic and comic scenes in the same play.

making us laugh, or feel sad or become silent with quiet expectation, or remain serene, as he wishes. Once we understand Shakespeare's plan in a particular play, much of the criticism of Rymer and Voltaire loses its validity. The play called *Hamlet* opens, without any impropriety, with a dialogue between two sentinels. In *Othello*, Iago's shouting at Brabantio's window does not injure the scheme of the play, though his wording may not be tolerable to a modern audience. The character of Polonius is appropriate and useful. And even the grave-diggers' conversation is acceptable.

(Paragraphs 22—27)

Shakespeare's natural genuis for comedy. Shakespeare wrote his plays in accordance with his natural disposition. He did not know the "rules" of dramatic writing. Rymer correctly tells us that Shakespeare's natural disposition lay in the direction of comedy. In writing tragedy he had to toil hard. But his comic scenes seem to have been written spontaneously and with great success. Comedy was, indeed, congenial to his nature. In his tragic scenes, there is always something wanting, but his comic scenes often surpass our expectations. His comedy gives us pleasure by the thoughts and the language. His tragedy gives pleasure chiefly by incidents and action. His tragedy seems to be the result of his skill ; his comedy is the product of his instinct. The force of his comic scenes has suffered very little on account of the changes in manners or in language brought about by time. The pleasures and the vexations of the characters in the comic scenes continue to appeal to us because they are not dependent on what is temporary or local but on fundamental qualities. The passing of time has not diminished the appeal of his comic scenes. Shakespeare seems to have obtained his comic dialogue from the common intercourse of life, and not from the language of "polite" society or from that of the learned people who tend to depart from the established forms of speech. The familiar dialogue in Shakespeare's plays is smooth and clear, yet not wholly without ruggedness or difficulty.

(Paragraphs 28- 31)

THE FAULTS OF SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare does not aim at a distinct moral purpose. If Shakespeare has his excellences, he has his faults also, and his faults can by no means be lightly dismissed. His first defect is that he sacrifices virtue to convenience. He is more careful to please than to instruct. The result is that he seems to write without any moral purpose. His moral precepts and axioms drop from him only casually. He makes no fair distribution of good or evil. He is not always careful to make his virtuous characters express their frank disapproval of wickedness. He carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong, and at the end dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance. This fault is serious because of the fact that it is always a writer's duty to make the world morally better. **(Paragraphs 32—33)**

He does not develop his plots properly. Secondly, Shakespeare's plots are often very loosely formed and carelessly pursued He neglects opportunities of giving instruction or pleasure which the development of the plot provides to him. In many of his plays the latter part does not receive much of his attention. When he finds himself near the end of a play, he neglects the labour required for the completion of the play, with the result that the catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented. **(Paragraph 34—35)**

He violates chronology Thirdly, Shakespeare shows no regard to distinction of time or place. He attributes to a certain nation or a certain period of history the customs, practices, and opinions of another. Thus we find Hector quoting Aristotle in *Troilus and Cressida*, and the love of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies in *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*. However, Shakespeare was not the only violator of chronology, because in the same age Sir Philip Sidney confused the pastoral with the feudal times in his *Arcadia*. **(Paragraph 36)**

His comic dialogue is often coarse. Fourthly, his comic scenes are seldom very successful when representing witty exchanges between characters. In such scenes the jests are generally indecent, and the pleasantries licentious The gentlemen and the ladies in such scenes show little delicacy or refinement and are hardly to be distinguished from the clowns. Whether this was the real conversation of ladies and gentlemen in Shakespeare's time is difficult to say. But, in any case, the coarseness of this conversation in Shakespeare's plays cannot be approved. **(Paragraph 37)**

Excessive labour produces undesired effects in the tragic plays. Fifthly, his tragic plays become worse in proportion to the labour he spends on them. Whenever he strains himself to produce effects, the result is meanness, tediousness, and obscurity. **(Paragraph 38)**

He is often verbose and prolix. Sixthly, his narration shows an undue pomp of diction and unnecessary verbiage and repetition. He uses more words than are necessary to describe an incident. Instead of lightening the narration by brevity, Shakespeare tries to lend it dignity and splendour by prolixity. **(Paragraph 39)**

Use of intricate language and inflated vocabulary. Seventhly, his declamations or set speeches are generally cold and feeble. Whenever he tries to show his own store of knowledge, he merely arouses the reader's pity or resentment. Now and then he becomes entangled with an unwieldy sentiment which he cannot well express and which he cannot reject. Sometimes the language is intricate even when the thought is not subtle, or the line is bulky though the image is not great. Sometimes trivial sentiments and

vulgar ideas are expressed through high-sounding and inflated vocabulary. **(Paragraphs 40—42)**

Intensity soon give way to feebleness. Eighthly, what he does best, he soon ceases to do. When he produces the effect of pathos, he soon employs some idle conceit or contemptible ambiguity. He no sooner begins to arouse the reader's sympathy than he counteracts himself. The feelings of terror and pity in the reader's heart are suddenly checked by the dramatist's becoming frigid in his treatment of the situation. Thus Shakespeare cuts short his own highest excellence in arousing tragic feelings by the spectacle of the fall of a great man, or the misfortune of an innocent character, or a disappointment in love. The result is that the intense feelings aroused by him suddenly lose their intensity and become feeble. **(Paragraph 43)**

His weakness for quibbles. Lastly, Shakespeare could never resist a quibble*. He must follow a quibble at all costs. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of a speech or an occasion, whether the situation be amusing or suspenseful, Shakespeare seizes the opportunity of employing a quibble. A quibble is, after all, something trivial. But Shakespeare found so much delight in it that he would sacrifice reason, propriety, and truth for its sake. For the sake of a quibble, Shakespeare was prepared to throw his whole play overboard, just as Antony readily sacrificed the opportunity of ruling the world in a vain effort to possess Cleopatra.

(Paragraph 44)

THE THREE UNITIES

Shakespeare's violation of the unities is not a defect. There is one practice in Shakespeare's writing of dramas which is regarded by critics as a defect but which is really not a defect. This practice is his neglect of the unities of time and place. In neglecting these unities, Shakespeare violated a law which had been established and recognised jointly by dramatists and critics. But it is possible to defend Shakespeare for this violation of the law. His history plays do not, of course, come under the purview of this law because of their very nature and because time and place must keep changing in plays of this kind. In his other plays, Shakespeare has largely preserved what is known as the unity of action. Although, being the dramatist of nature,† Shakespeare does not unfold any hidden design of the story in his plays, his story has generally a beginning, a middle, and an end, as required by Aristotle. There is a logical connection between incident and incident, and the conclusion follows naturally. Some incidents may be superfluous, but the plot as a whole develops gradually and naturally, and the end of the play marks also the end of our expectation.

(Paragraphs 45—48)

**quibble*—play on words ; pun ; intentional ambiguity.

†dramatist of nature—dramatist who portrays life as he finds it ; realistic dramatist.

Shakespeare's neglect of the unities of time and place. Shakespeare neglects the unities of time and place. These unities have been held in high esteem since the time of Corneille. But a close examination of the principles on which these unities stand will show that they are not of much use. **(Paragraph 49)**

The arguments for and against the unities of time and place. The reason for the observance of unities of time and place is the belief that they make the plot of the drama plausible and credible. An action which is spread over months and years, it is said by the supporters of the unities, will strain the spectators' belief if it is supposed to take only three hours on the stage. Similarly, changes from one place to another will not find acceptance with the spectators who remain in their seats in the same theatre throughout the performance. Having seen the first act at Alexandria, the spectators cannot believe that the next act takes place at Rome, when they themselves remain where they were. But the answer to this objection is that no audience ever accepts the performance on a stage to be absolutely true. If the audience cannot believe that, the first act having been presented at Alexandria, the second is being presented in Rome, they could not have believed that even the first act took place at Alexandria when they themselves have been sitting in a theatre in London. Likewise, no audience can actually believe that, in point of time, they are witnessing events that took place in the days of Antony and Cleopatra. But if it is possible for the audience to believe that in the first act they were at Alexandria, they can also believe that in the next act they are in Rome; and they can also likewise believe the changes in respect of time. The fact is that the spectators never really forget themselves. They know that, from the first act to the last, the stage on which events are being presented is only a stage and that the players are only players. In any case, there is no absurdity in representing the stage as Athens in the first act of the drama and as Sicily in the second act when the stage is only a stage, and neither Athens nor Sicily.

(Paragraphs 50—54)

The passage of time between the acts. An extension of time is valid on the same grounds. Generally long stretches of time are believed to elapse only between the acts, and not in the course of the same act. In the case of a large part of the action, the real duration is the same as the duration of the action on the stage. If in the first act preparations for war against Mithridates are supposed to have been made in Rome, the result of the war may, without absurdity, be represented in a later act as happening in Pontus. The audience is well aware that there is neither war nor preparation for war and that the whole thing has just to be accepted as true. They know that they are neither in Rome nor in Pontus, and that neither Mithridates nor Lucullus is before them.

In short, a lapse of months or years can easily be imagined by the audience as having occurred between one act and another.

(Paragraph 55)

The limited credulity of the audience. The fact that the spectators do not believe that they are witnessing actual events occurring at actual places does not mean that they are totally incredulous of the various happenings on the stage. They take the dramatic performance as a just picture of reality. The evils that they see on the stage may not be believed by them to be real evils but they are taken by them as evils to which they themselves may be exposed. When they see the actors on the stage in a miserable state, they imagine themselves to be miserable for the moment. That much credulity is always there. Otherwise, the audience knows that they are witnessing only a fiction. In fact, the pleasure of tragedy proceeds from this awareness of fiction. If the audience believed the murders and the treasons in a tragic performance to be real, they would not feel pleased to see them. **(Paragraph 56)**

The stage brings realities of life to our minds. Events represented on the stage produce pain or pleasure, not because the audience believes them to be true, but because they bring realities to mind. When we see fountains and trees in a painting, we do not actually feel the coolness of the shade or of the water; but we do imagine the pleasure we would get if we were actually in the midst of trees and fountains. We are agitated while reading the events in *Henry the Fifth*; yet we do not take the pages of this play to be the battlefield of Agnicourt. Seeing a dramatic performance on the stage is similar to reading a book. **(Paragraph 57)**

Comedy to be watched, tragedy to be perused. Comedy is often more powerful when we see it on the stage; but tragedy is often more powerful when we read it in the pages of a book. We feel more amused by the humour of a comic character like Petruchio when it is accompanied by the gestures or the facial distortions of the actor. But neither voice nor gesture can add dignity or force to the soliloquy of a tragic character like Cato.

(Paragraph 57 continued)

Acceptance by the reader and the spectator of changes of scene and the passage of time. Just as a reader accepts the changes of location and the passage of time in a narrative poem, so a spectator accepts these in the case of a play when acted on the stage (or even a person who reads it at home). It does not matter therefore if the unities of time and place are disregarded by a dramatist and if a longer or shorter time is shown as having passed between the acts or if changes of scene are suggested.

(Paragraph 58)

Shakespeare's possible ignorance of the rule regarding the unities. Whether Shakespeare was aware of the rule prescribing the unities and deliberately rejected that rule, or whether he

violated this rule in sheer ignorance of its very existence, is unknown to us. It is quite possible that he deviated from this rule just by chance and in ignorance of it. Nor is there any reason for us to deplore his ignorance in this matter. Such violations of rules are a natural result of the comprehensive genius of Shakespeare. Only petty-minded critics would disapprove such deviations from rules in the case of a genius. **(Paragraph 59)**

Unities of time and place not essential. Although "authority" is on the side of rules, it can yet be asserted that the unities of time and place are not essential to a good play. These two unities do sometimes add to the pleasure of a play. But they can be sacrificed for the sake of the nobler beauties of variety and instruction. A play which scrupulously observes the rules may be regarded as the product of superfluous and ostentatious art. The highest graces of a play are to copy nature and instruct life. If a dramatist complies with this requirement and can yet observe all the unities, he deserves applause for his accomplishment. Some of those critics who advocate the unities are men of fame and worthy of all respect. But this only shows that the principles governing the writing of drama are in need of a fresh scrutiny.

(Paragraphs 60—62)

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS AGE

The importance of "incidents" or "action" in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's ignorance of rules, if ignorance it was, has to be condoned in view of the circumstances of his life. A man's actions, to be rightly judged, must be looked at in the context of the conditions in which he lived and worked. It is always desirable to determine how much of a man's performance was due to his original powers and how much to casual and accessory help flowing from circumstances. The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. The learned languages were at this time being cultivated by scholars. Greek was being taught to boys in the leading schools. People were becoming interested in the study of Italian and Spanish poets. But this awakening was yet confined to professional scholars or to aristocratic men and women. The general public was still largelv uneducated and unenlightened. This period might even be regarded as the infancy of the English nation. At this initial stage of intellectual development, people are generally attracted by what is crude and fictitious. Accordingly, the generality of the English people at this time felt excited by unreal stories of giants, dragons, and other wonders. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was their favourite reading. People who are fed on the delectable wonders of fiction cannot appreciate writings which are characterised by truth and realism. It was therefore necessary for Shakespeare, who did not invent his own plots for his dramas, to borrow them from the most popular of the existing novels. His audience could not

have understood the intricacies of his plays, if they had not known his plots beforehand. His plots, whether historical or purely imaginary, are always packed with incidents. The attention of this infant nation could be more easily caught by exciting incidents than by sentiment or argumentation. The element of the marvellous has always a great appeal for the people. Accordingly, Shakespeare selected his plots so as to excite the curiosity of the readers or the spectators by representing incidents and events. The people of his time were more interested in spectacle than in poetical language. They therefore wanted some visible events to accompany the dialogue. It was necessary that, to please such people, his plays should contain actions as well as speeches. A speech, unaccompanied by action or event, would have been coldly received, no matter how elegant, passionate, or sublime. **(Paragraphs 63—72)**

***Cato* versus *Othello*.** Voltaire criticised what he considered the extravagances of Shakspeare, and held up Addison's tragic play *Cato* for admiration. Voltaire did not realise that Addison spoke the language of poets, while Shakespeare spoke the language of men. In spite of its many beauties, *Cato* fails to acquaint us with human sentiments or human actions. A play by Shakespeare, such as *Othello*, is the vigorous and lively product of genius working upon actual observation of life. *Cato* offered a splendid representation of artificial manners and contains noble sentiments expressed in harmonious language. But it fails to evoke any response from the reader, and its hopes and fears do not arouse an echo in our hearts. *Othello* is, however, a great success in this respect. Shakespeare is not a "correct" and "regular" writer, but his dramas contain infinite riches and are full of endless diversity, even though the riches in them are mingled with much that is crude, coarse, and mean. **(Paragraphs 73—74)**

Was Shakespeare a man of learning ? It has been a subject of much dispute whether Shakespeare's excellence flowed from his own native genius, or whether it was the result of scholastic learning, the rules of literary criticism, and the examples of ancient writers. According to a traditional belief, Shakespeare was devoid of scholastic learning, had no regular education, and did not know much Latin or Greek. There are some people who have, however, discovered signs of deep learning in Shakespeare. They have traced some of his sentences to other works, thus showing that Shakespeare had done a lot of reading and was therefore a learned man. The sentence, "Go before, I'll follow" in his play *Richard III* has been regarded as a translation of "*I prae, sequar*" in Terence's *Andria*. Similarly, Caliban's remark "I cried to sleep again" in *The Tempest* is believed to be an echo of a remark of Anacreon. But these resemblances are either accidental or due to Shakespeare's having merely heard these remarks, and are no evidence of his scholarship. The *Comedy of Errors* is derived from Plautus's *Menaechmi*, but Shakespeare must have relied on an English translation which was available to him. **(Paragraphs 75—80)**

His natural genius, and its role in his achievement. It is not certain that Shakespeare knew the modern languages such as French and Italian. The French scenes in his plays might have been written by some other hand. In the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, he most probably followed the English translation, not the Italian original. This means that what he borrowed from foreign sources was borrowed from English translations of foreign works, and not from the foreign originals. The wide knowledge that is to be found in his plays is such as was derived not from books but from his personal observation and experience, even though he was a very diligent reader of books, especially of books in his own language or of foreign works as translated into English. The greater part of his excellence as a dramatist was due to his own genius. He found the English theatre in an elementary state. No critical works on drama had yet been produced. Neither character nor dialogue was yet understood He may duly be regarded as having introduced both these into drama, and he carried these to the utmost height in some of his scenes. **(Paragraphs 81—85)**

The role of his actual experience of life. The curve of Shakespeare's dramatic development is hard to trace, because the order in which he produced his plays is yet unsettled. Rowe seems to be wrong in thinking that his most vigorous work was done by him in his youth. Natural genius cannot be a substitute for actual experience of life and the world. However gifted by nature a man might be, he can put in his works what he has learned from life. Shakespeare too must have added to his knowledge by gradual acquisition. Like everybody else, he must have grown wiser as he grew older. He could not therefore, have written his best plays when he was still young and comparatively inexperienced in the ways of life. He must have looked upon mankind with greater curiosity, clarity, and attentiveness with the passing of years. He was most original in his portrayal of characters. No writer before, with the possible exception of Chaucer, had portrayed human character in a realistic manner. **(Paragraphs 86—87)**

Shakespeare's wide knowledge of human nature in spite of his handicaps. The science of psychology had not yet, in Shakespeare's time, started its investigations into the nature and working of the human mind. No literary writer could therefore have acquired any knowledge of human nature from any books of psychology. Only by a first-hand observation of human life and its numerous manifestations could anybody form any coherent ideas about human nature and human character. Shakespeare did not have the kind of advantage that Robert Boyle had for satisfying his curiosity about human behaviour, namely the advantage of high birth. Shakespeare went to London as a needy adventurer and lived for some time by very mean employments. However, his genius was not depressed or limited by his poor circumstances. In spite of his handicaps, he was able to gather an exact knowledge

of many modes of life and many kinds of temperament. This knowledge enabled him to portray the multiplicity and diversity of character and to reveal subtle distinctions between man and man. In this respect, he had none to imitate, though he himself was imitated by all succeeding writers. More maxims of theoretical knowledge and more rules of practical prudence are to be found in his dramas than in the works of all his successors*.

(Paragraphs 88—90)

His valuable contribution to English drama. Shakespeare's knowledge of the inanimate world was as wide and exact as that of human beings. Whether life or Nature be his subject, he gives evidence of having seen things with his own eyes. The images which he gives us in his plays are such as his own mind had directly received. Nothing in his work is second-hand ; nothing is derived from the works of other writers, especially because no other writers of his calibre had existed before him. It would be difficult to find any author, except Homer, who has so much invention to his credit, or who so much advanced the studies which he cultivated. He was the originator of the form, the characters, the language, and the shows of English drama. Dennis said that Shakespeare was the original of English tragical harmony, that is, the harmony of blank verse, diversified often by disyllable and trisyllable terminations. This statement may not be strictly true because the disyllable termination is to be found, if not in *Gorboduc*, yet in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, or *Hieronemo Is Mad Again* which certainly does not owe anything to Shakespeare. But Shakespeare was certainly the first playwright whose tragic as well as comic plays succeeded in providing the dramatic pleasure appropriate to them. He was the first, with the possible exception of Spenser, to discover the degree of smoothness and harmony which the English language was capable of attaining. There are speeches and scenes in his plays having all the delicacy of Rowe, without the latter's effeminacy. He often strikes by the force and vigour of his dialogue, but he executes his purpose better when he tries to soothe by softness. **(Paragraphs 91—94)**

Shakespeare, not a fastidious writer. Though much of the praise given to Shakespeare is based on perception and judgment, much is due to custom and veneration. We fix our eyes upon Shakespeare's graces and turn them from his faults, enduring in him what we would detest or despise in another writer. John Upton, in his *Critical Observations on Shakespeare*, has unfortunately lavished praise on certain features of Shakespeare's plays which merely tend to show that Shakespeare corrupted language by every mode of depravation. There are in his plays scenes of undoubted and lasting excellence, but there is not one play which, if it were

*Of course, we ust keep in mind the date when these words were written. It would be impossible to make such a statement today. The statement was, however, valid at the time it was made.

now performed as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard till the end. The reason for this is that Shakespeare felt satisfied with his work the moment he thought that his audience would be satisfied. In other words, he did not try to rise much above the standard of his own age. **(Paragraphs 95—96)**

Shakespeare's indifference to fame. There is no evidence that Shakespeare thought his works to be worthy of respect or tribute from the coming generations. His object was immediate popularity and immediate profit. When his plays had been acted, his expectations were fulfilled. He hoped for nothing further. He did not therefore mind repeating the same jests in several plays, or entangling different plots by the same kind of complication, though this repetition could be condoned because he was not the only one to adopt this procedure. (Two of Congreve's four comedies conclude with a marriage in a mask, by a deception which perhaps never happened). Shakespeare was so careless of future fame that he made no collection of his plays and did not try to rid the plays, which had already been published, of the additions and alterations with which others had corrupted them. The greater part of his plays were not published till about seven years after his death. The few which appeared during his life-time had not received the benefit of his scrutiny. **(Paragraphs 97—99)**

Corrupted text of his plays. The publishers who brought out his plays showed neither care nor skill in doing so. The result was that many of the passages were corrupted beyond recovery. Many other passages became suspect because they were obscured by obsolete phraseology or by the writer's unskilfulness and affectation. If Shakespeare had published his own works, scholars could afterwards have cleared his obscurities and disentangled his intricacies. But, in the absence of an authentic edition, alterations and deletions were made on the basis of conjecture. **(Paragraph 100)**

Various causes of the mutilation of the text. There were other causes too for the faults which crept into the various editions of Shakespeare's works. His style was in itself ungrammatical, perplexed, and obscure. His plays were written for the actor by those who hardly understood them. The copiers added to the errors. The text was sometimes mutilated by the actors wanting to shorten the speeches. The printing presses made their own contribution to the errors. **(Paragraph 101)**

Rowe's edition of Shakespeare's plays. In this state the plays of Shakespeare remained, chiefly because the art of editing literary works was not yet applied to modern languages. At last an edition was undertaken by Rowe whose chief object was not to correct or explain but to publish the works with the additions of a biographical sketch and a recommendatory preface. Rowe did, however, make a number of emendations which his successors have adopted, unfortunately without acknowledgment. **(Paragraph 102)**

Johnson's debt to his predecessors. Speaking of his own edition of Shakespeare's plays, Dr. Johnson tells us that he has preserved the prefaces written by his predecessors in this line and that he has borrowed the life-sketch of Shakespeare from Rowe's edition even though Rowe's sketch is not written with much elegance or spirit. **(Paragraph 103)**

Pope's efforts to reform the text. Many years after Rowe's edition of Shakespeare's plays, Alexander Pope wrote on the true state of Shakespeare's text, showing that it was extremely corrupt and hoping to reform it. Pope collated the old copies, and restored many lines to their integrity. But he rejected whatever he disliked, thus effecting deletions more than reform. Dr. Warburton has unjustly praised Pope for distinguishing the genuine from the spurious plays. In making this distinction, Pope exerted no judgment of his own, having been guided by those who had edited the plays before. Pope was averse to what he, in his preface to the edition of Shakespeare's plays, called "the dull duty of an editor." The duty of a collator is indeed dull; yet it is very necessary.

(Paragraphs 104—106)

The work of an emendatory critic An emendatory critic's work is, however, far from dull. He must have before him all possibilities of meaning, with all possibilities of expression, while going through a corrupted piece in order to correct it. Out of many readings possible, he should be able to select that which best accords with the state, opinions, and modes of language prevailing in every age and with his author's particular way of thinking and mode of expression. The editor of Shakespeare's plays has not only to be a collator but also an emendatory critic. Pope's edition fell short of his own expectations and he felt annoyed at having left anything for others to do. **(Paragraphs 106—107)**

All Pope's notes have been retained by Johnson. Dr. Johnson tells us that, in his edition, he has retained all Pope's notes so that no fragment of the great writer may be lost. Pope's preface is valuable both for the justice of its remarks and the elegance of its expression. His preface also contains extensive criticism which has the merit of exactness. **(Paragraph 108)**

Theobald, not a very satisfactory editor of Shakespeare's plays. Pope was followed by Theobald. Theobald was scrupulous about minute accuracy, but he was lacking in the splendour of genius. He collated the old copies and rectified many errors. But in his reports of copies and editions he cannot be trusted without close scrutiny. For instance, he mentions the two first Folios as of "high" authority, and the third Folio as of "middle" authority. "But the truth is that the first Folio is equivalent to all others and that the rest only deviate from it by the printer's negligence." Dr. Johnson says that, of Theobald's notes, he has in general retained those which Theobald himself retained in his second edition,

excluding those which were too minute or those which had been called in question by other annotators. Some of Theobald's notes merely betray inflated emptiness. In fact, as Shakespeare's editor, Theobald did not deserve the reputation he had acquired.

(Paragraphs 109—112)

Hanmer's work. The next editor of Shakespeare's plays was Sir Thomas Hanmer. He possessed the necessary intuition to discover the writer's intention and he was a man of much reading and wide knowledge. He seldom passes what he does not understand, without an attempt to find or to make a meaning. He is anxious to reduce to grammar what he was not certain that Shakespeare intended to be grammatical. Shakespeare regarded more the series of ideas than of words. He was satisfied if his language successfully conveyed his meanings to the audience. After all, he wrote for the stage, not for the study. Hanmer has also tried to reform Shakespeare's metre in many passages, thus continuing the labour of certain other editors, and Hanmer has been quite successful in this effort. But, in inserting his emendations, he makes no mention of the varying copies, and has in fact adopted the emendations of his predecessors without acknowledging the debt. He has also made the mistake of supposing that whatever was done by Pope and Theobald was right. Dr. Johnson informs us that he has utilized all Hanmer's notes which were written with care and diligence.

(Paragraphs 113—116)

Warburton's merits and faults. Warburton comes next. Warburton's notes are not among his most successful efforts. Warburton's most glaring error in writing his commentary on Shakespeare is his acceptance of the very first thoughts that came to him. He believed himself to be a man of quick discernment, and he presumed to do, by a superficial survey, what he should have done by laboriously penetrating the bottom. His notes contain sometimes perverse interpretations and sometimes unconvincing conjectures. He sometimes finds more profundity of meaning than actually exists and sometimes discovers absurdities where the meaning is clear to every reader. But his emendations are often just and his interpretation of obscure passages intelligent and learned. Of his notes, Dr. Johnson has rejected those which Warburton himself probably desired to be forgotten. Of the rest, Dr. Johnson has given high praise to some, leaving some to the judgment of the reader, and condemning others without reserve. **(Paragraph 117—119)**

Critics of Warburton. Dr. Johnson deplores the fact that critics have to waste a good deal of their labour in contradicting the interpretations, judgments, and conclusions of those who have written before them. The chief desire of a commentator is to show the faults and shortcomings of what other commentators have said about an author. The opinions prevalent in one age as truths are contradicted and rejected in another age, and are accepted again in future times. All those who try to add to human knowledge are

subject to such vicissitudes and changes of opinion. Warburton's notes evoked many protests. The chief assailants of Warburton were the authors of *The Canons of Criticism* and of the *Revisal of Shakespeare's Text.** Both of them have been unsparing in their condemnation. They have both shown sufficient acuteness in the discovery of faults and both have offered some probable interpretations of obscure passages. But they have over-estimated their own abilities. **(Paragraphs 120—123)**

Upton and Grey. Before Warburton produced his edition of Shakespeare's plays, John Upton had published his *Critical Observations on Shakespeare*. Many of Upton's explanations are curious and useful, but the emendations suggested by him show no skill. Zachary Grey's *Critical, Historical, and Explanatory Notes* on Shakespeare is a work containing some useful observations but neither judicial nor emendatory criticism. Grey has the virtue of modesty which should be an example for others.

(Paragraphs 124—125)

Dr. Johnson's debt to others. Dr. Johnson then expresses the view that none of his predecessors has left Shakespeare without improvement. He also expresses his indebtedness to them all for assistance and information. He has acknowledged this indebtedness in each case, but if he has not done so in some cases it is because he believed that what he was writing was his own and not borrowed from anyone. If in any case he has expressed an opinion or view which, without his knowing it, had already been expressed by some other commentator, he is willing to concede the honour to the first claimant. **(Paragraph 126)**

The jealousy and intolerance of commentators. Dr. Johnson then goes on to say that, in dealing with all other commentators and critics, he has shown a candour which they have not shown to one another. Why commentators should feel bitter towards one another is ununderstandable. The various readings of copies and different interpretations of a passage should exercise the wit and judgment of commentators but should not arouse their passions. But it seems that small things make mean men proud, and that all opposition makes proud men angry. There is often in the commentaries on Shakespeare an unbecoming element of contempt and abuse for fellow commentators. One reason for this contempt and abuse may be that the commentator has very little to say and that he wishes to lend weight to his matter with his fury. A commentator sometimes wants to supply by vehemence and rage what he is lacking in substance and dignity. **(Paragraphs 127—128)**

Three kinds of notes. The notes, says Dr. Johnson, which he has supplied for his edition of Shakespeare's plays are of three kinds : (*i*) illustrative, by which difficulties are explained ; (*ii*) judi-

* written by Benjamin Heath in 1765.

cial, by which faults and beauties are pointed out; and (*iii*) emendatory, by which corrupt lines or passages are corrected. Some of these notes, he says, are borrowed from others because he accepts them as correct. **(Paragraphs 129—130)**

Explanation of obscure passages. After all the labours of the various editors, Dr. Johnson found many passages in Shakespeare's plays likely to obstruct the understanding of a majority of readers. He has tried to explain such passages but he has taken care to see that his explanations are neither unduly copious nor unduly economical. He believes that he has made Shakespeare's meanings clear to many who before were frightened of reading his plays. **(Paragraph 131)**

Completeness not claimed by Dr. Johnson. No single scholiast can supply complete explanation of an author like Shakespeare who is desultory and vagrant, and who abounds in casual allusions and light hints. Shakespeare's plays, like all plays, contain references to persons, customs, and practices well-known in his own times but completely forgotten afterwards. It becomes the duty of an editor to throw light on as many of these matters as he can explore. Dr. Johnson says that he has allowed some passages to remain unexplained because he himself did not understand them. These some future editor might explain. He has explained some others which were neglected or misunderstood previously. In some, cases, he has supplied only brief remarks or directions, and in some other cases he has supplied more laborious comments. To an editor nothing is a trifle by which his author is obscured.

(Paragraphs 132—133)

The readers should form their own judgments of Shakespeare. Dr. Johnson tells us that he has not been very studious about pointing out poetical beauties or defects. In the case of some plays he has provided a few judicial observations, and in the case of others more such observations, depending not on the merits of the plays themselves but on his own caprice. Every reader should form his own judgments, but some initiation is necessary. In acquiring any kind of skill, some instruction is necessary. Dr. Johnson has, accordingly, provided the necessary guidance, leaving the reader to make his own discoveries and form his own critical judgments about the plays of Shakespeare. **(Paragraph 134)**

Praise and censure. At the end of most plays, Dr. Johnson tells us, he has added brief judgments containing a general praise of excellence or condemnation of faults. As his examination of the plays has not been minute, the plays which he has condemned may contain much that is praiseworthy, and those which he has praised may contain much deserving of condemnation.

(Paragraph 135)

Collation and conjecture. The emendation of corrupted passages has engaged the labour of most of the editors of Shakespeare. Public attention to this matter was first drawn by the violent controversy between Pope and Theobald. The restoration of passages believed to have suffered depravation could be attempted only by the collation of copies or by a shrewdness of conjecture. The work of collation is safe and easy. But the task of conjecture is dangerous and difficult. As the greater part of the plays were available only in one copy, the danger and difficulty of conjecture could not be avoided. Dr. Johnson says that he has made use of some of the emendations of every editor ; some of the emendations he has rejected without mentioning them ; some he has mentioned in the notes without either expressing approval or disapproval ; and some he has included with his adverse comments.

(Paragraphs 136—138)

The middle path between presumption and timidity. Dr. Johnson further informs us that he collated such copies as he could obtain and wished that he could have acquired more. His examination of the old copies showed that the later publishers allowed many passages to stand without authority, and were satisfied with Rowe's regulation of the text even where it was either arbitrary or wrong. Dr. Johnson therefore rectified such corruptions, because the history of the English language and the true force of words could only be preserved by keeping the text of authors free from corruption. Other editors had smoothed the cadence or regulated the metre ; but Dr. Johnson did not exercise much effort on such matters. The emendations which were supplied by a comparison of copies have been inserted by Dr. Johnson in the text, sometimes without notice, and sometimes with an account of the reasons for the change. He did not avail himself of much freedom in the matter of conjecture. He believed that the reading of the old books should not be disturbed just for the sake of elegance, clarity, or improvement of the sense. They who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to be correct in their version than those who afterwards used conjecture. But they often made mistakes either through ignorance or through negligence. It was, therefore, appropriate that criticism should play its part, though, in attempting such criticism, Dr. Johnson has followed the middle path "between presumption and timidity." His first labour, however, was always to examine the old text from every angle and to make alterations only when an exhaustive scrutiny justified it. As a result, he has rescued many lines and many scenes from corrections which were uncalled-for but which had been made by editors in their over-enthusiasm. **(Paragraphs 139—143)**

Arbitrary division of plays into five acts. The customary distribution of the plays into acts, says Dr. Johnson, has been preserved by him though he believes that this distribution has little sanction behind it. The settled convention of the theatre

required four intervals in a play, but few of Shakespeare's dramas could be properly distributed in that manner. An act should cover that much of a drama as passes without any intervention of time or change of place. A pause would therefore mean the beginning of a new act. The restriction of having only five acts was thus arbitrary. Shakespeare knew this and so he wrote his plays in one unbroken continuity. The proper thing to do now is to perform the plays with short pauses occurring as many times as the scene is changed or as often as any considerable time is supposed to elapse.
(Paragraph 144)

Nothing is trivial to an editor. Dr. Johnson has not been very particular abour restoring Shakespeare's original punctuation. Nor has he paid much attention to particles and other words of slight effect which he has sometimes inserted or omitted without notice. Readers who blame editors for spending too much labour on mere trifles do not understand all the implications of the art of editing. **(Paragraphs 145—147)**

Dr. Johnson has kept out his own conjectural emendations. Dr. Johnson avoided inserting his own readings in the text because he did not wish to rely much on conjecture. Wherever he has been guided by conjecture, the result may have been freakish but harmless in so far as the text on the whole has remained uninjured. Nor has he made any ostentatious display of his own readings. The notes written by him, for instance, could have been much longer, because the art of writing notes is not difficult to acquire. But he believes that there is no need to alter a text if the proposed alteration requires a lengthy justification. His perusal of the work of his predecessors showed many critical misadventures and errors. He found that the editors of Shakespeare had been struggling with their own sophistry and confused by their own learning. This gave him the feeling that his own emendations and notes might subsequently be judged by his successors as being erroneous or unsatisfactory. A conjectural critic will inevitably be often mistaken because in his art there is no system. He may fail, and fail ridiculously, because of even a slight misunderstanding of a phrase or an oblique view of a passage. Thus in the pleasure of conjecture there is a hidden danger. **(Paragraphs 148—154)**

The merit and the defect of conjectural criticism. Yet conjectural criticism has been of great use in the world of learning. Such criticism has exercised many powerful minds, from Joannes Andreas to Richard Bentley. The editors of ancient classical authors, however, get much help which the editor of Shakespeare does not get. They have to deal with grammatical and settled languages whose construction contributes so much to clarity that there are fewer unintelligible passages in Homer than in Chaucer. Besides, there are generally more manuscripts than one in the case of ancient classical authors, and those manuscripts do not often

conspire in the same mistakes. In spite of that Justus Scaliger could confess that his emendations of ancient authors gave him little satisfaction. Said he : "Our conjectures make us look silly ; we are ashamed of them after we have come upon better manuscripts." And Justus Lipsius could complain that critics were introducing faults by trying to remove them. And, indeed, where mere conjecture is to be used, the emendations of Scaliger and Lipsius in respect of ancient classical authors are often vague and disputable, like those of Theobald or Dr. Johnson himself in respect of Shakespeare.

(Paragaph 155)

What Dr. Johnson has done and what he has failed to do. Dr. Johnson says that he, in his work of editing Shakespeare's plays, may not have fulfilled public expectations, the expectations either of the ignorant or of the learned. Nor has he been able to satisfy himself with this work though he has performed it with a feeling of great concern. He has attempted to restore every single passage in Shakespeare's plays that appeared to him to be corrupt, and he has tried to explain every single passage that seemed to him obscure. In the case of many passages he has failed, like many others before him. In the case of many other passages, he has admitted his incapacity. Wherever he himself could not understand a passage, he has acknowledged the fact. Where it was not necessary for him to make any comment, he has not done so, and where others have said enough he has desisted from saying anything.

(Paragraph 156)

How to read Shakespeare. Notes are necessary evils. But he who really wants to enjoy Shakespeare should first read his plays from beginning to end without any help from annotators or commentators. Let him read through clear passages and obscure passages, through passages that bear the stamp of Shakespeare himself and through passages which have been corrupted by others. Only when he has done so and enjoyed the pleasures of novelty, should he turn to the commentators and try to get exact meanings. If the reader concentrates on particular passages in the very first instance, the general effect of a play would be weakened. Parts of a work should not be examined till the whole has been surveyed. Emphasis on parts will show the smaller niceties, but the beauty of the whole will by this procedure be dimmed.

(Paragraphs 157—159)

Dryden's tribute. The large number of the editors of Shakespeare's plays cannot have added much to Shakespeare's power of pleasing his readers. Even before these editors had exercised their minds, Dryden had paid a tribute to the largeness and comprehensiveness of Shakespeare's vision. According to Dryden, Shakespeare was naturally learned and did not need the spectacles of books to read nature. Many passages in Shakespeare are flat and insipid. Much of his comic wit is vulgar and much

of his serious writing is mere bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him. Dryden goes on to say that whenever Shakespeare had a fit subject for his genius he could rise higher than the rest of poets. **(Paragraph 160)**

Shakespeare's own responsibility for his obscurity. It is to be deplored, says Dr. Johnson, that a writer like Shakespeare should need a commentary, and that his language should become obsolete or his sentiments obscure. But accident and time have brought about such a situation. Shakespeare has suffered much through his own indifference to fame or perhaps on account of that superiority of mind which judged its productions as unworthy to be preserved. **(Paragraph 161)**

Dr Johnson does not claim perfection for his work. Dr. Johnson concludes the Preface by remarking that the public will now judge him by the work that he has done with regard to the plays of Shakespeare. He received much encouragement in the execution of his work and he hopes that his work will be found to be satisfactory in proportion to that encouragement. Every work of this kind by its very nature falls short of perfection, and he would not feel disappointed if his attempts were found to be unsatisfactory by those who are qualified and competent to pass judgment.

(Paragraph 162)

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8

A Contemporary Reviewer's view of Johnson's "Preface"

Here are the comments of a contemporary reviewer on Johnson's *Preface* :

We find little, says this reviewer, in the first five pages of the *Preface* but trite and common-place reflections on our veneration for antiquity, and on the general talents of Shakespeare. These reflections are delivered in that pompous style which is so peculiar to Johnson, and is so much admired by some readers. In some places, however, he is less verbose ; and then he is generally sensible, instructive and entertaining.*

After justly praising Shakespeare for being "the poet of nature" and for holding up to his readers "a faithful mirror of manners and of life", Johnson proceeds to exonerate him from the condemnation of Rymer, Dennis, and Voltaire. He enters particularly into a defence of tragi-comedy, or that mixed kind of drama, which had given such great offence to the minor critics. Although the critics had condemned this kind of drama too severely, Johnson's reasoning is not wholly satisfying (in paragraphs 17—21). What follows also is a little problematical. Johnson prefers Shakespeare's comic scenes to his tragic ones : "In his tragic scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct." This is a general assertion, and is unsupported by any particular examples. It may be founded to a great extent on the preference which Johnson himself might have felt for comedy in general. Different people have different attitudes so that, if we were to test this assertion by particular applications, we would possibly find that there are as many opinions as people.

After having enumerated the various merits of Shakespeare, Johnson proceeds to mention his faults ; faults, he says, "sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit." The first defect he charges Shakespeare with is that Shakespeare "sacrifices virtue to convenience" and that he writes "without any moral purpose". The

*The reviewer quotes paragraphs 8—14 as an illustration of this point

question that arises here is whether a writer may be accused of sacrificing virtue just because he does not professedly inculcate it. Do we expect every writer by intention to be a preacher or a moral philosopher? It is doubtless always the duty of a *moralist* to strive to make the world better. But it is no small merit in a *comic poet* to be able to divert and amuse the world without making it worse. Besides, Johnson himself admits that "a system of social duty may be selected from Shakespeare's writings", and that Shakespeare's precepts and axioms are virtuous, even though they drop casually from him. Shakespeare did not know that the rules of criticism required the drama to have a particular moral. Nor did he think himself bound as a *poet* to write like a *philosopher*. Shakespeare "carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong" for the same reason as he makes them laugh and cry in the same piece. In other words, Shakespeare's attitude *vis-a-vis* morality may be justified on the same principle as his mingling of tragic and comic scenes. This principle is a strict imitation of nature; and Shakespeare is the poet of nature. If Shakespeare had lived in the eighteenth century and had possessed Johnson's critical knowledge, he would perhaps not have sacrificed *virtue* to *convenience*. Shakespeare, it is true, has depicted none of "those faultless monsters which the world never saw."* He did not try to restrict the designs of Providence to the narrow bounds of poetical justice, but has shown the sun shining, as it really does, both on the just and the unjust.

The next fault Johnson charges Shakespeare with is the want of connection and consistency in his plots. It is not possible to defend Shakespeare against this charge any more than against the charge that follows, namely that Shakespeare pays no regard to distinction of time or place. Shakespeare certainly does not hesitate to give "to one age or nation the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood but even of possibility". But, surely Johnson would admit that the "barbarity" of Shakespeare's age could extenuate this fault since, by Johnson's own admission, Shakespeare was "not the only violator of chronology, for in the same age Sidney, who wanted not the advantages of learning, has, in his *Arcadia*, confounded the pastoral with the feudal times, the days of innocence, quiet, and security, with those of turbulence, violence, and adventure."

Shakespeare, according to Johnson, is seldom very successful in his comic scenes, when his characters engage in raillery or repartee, or as Johnson more quaintly expresses it, "in reciprocations of smartness and contests of sarcasm." Their jests, we are told, "are commonly gross, and their pleasantry licentious". Disagreeing with this judgment of Johnson, our reviewer says that Shakespeare is sometimes peculiarly successful in hitting off that kind of sheer wit

*These words occur in an essay on poetry written in 1682 by John Sheffield.

for which writers like Congreve and Farquhar have been so generally admired. The "reciprocations of smartness" between Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* are not inferior to anything of the kind and, though the dialogue of Shakespeare's gentlemen and ladies may not be very delicate and refined, it is full as witty, and not a jot more licentious, than what we frequently find in Vanbrugh and Congreve, who had not the barbarity of the age as an excuse.

Nor does this reviewer agree with Johnson's opinion regarding the quirks and quibbles of Shakespeare's clowns, which sometimes infect the graver part of his writings. Johnson asserts that "a quibble is to Shakespeare what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire......A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." According to this reviewer, Shakespeare's native genius was too sublime to be too captivated with the charms of so contemptible a device as a quibble. Shakespeare probably indulged in quibbles so frequently merely to please the taste of the times. Another commentator thus defends Shakespeare's practice in this respect: "Our poet wrote for the stage, rude and unpolished as it then was; and the vicious taste of the age must stand condemned for the poor witticisms and conceits that fell from his pen; since he has left upon record a signal proof of how much he despised them. In his play of *The Merchant of Venice*, a clown is introduced quibbling in a miserable manner; upon which one who bears the character of a man of sense makes the following reflection: 'How every fool can play upon a word! I think the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence, and discourse grow commendable in none but parrots.' He could hardly have found stronger words to express his indignation at those false pretences to wit then in vogue; and therefore though such trash is frequently interspersed in his writings, it would be unjust to cast it as an imputation upon his taste and judgment as a writer." Whether the reader should trust Johnson's judgment in this matter or whether he should trust Shakespeare himself on the basis of the words quoted from *The Merchant of Venice*, is left to the reader to decide.

In speaking of Shakespeare's faults in tragedy, Johnson says that whenever Shakespeare strains himself, the result of his labours is "tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity." Johnson also says that the declamations or set-speeches in Shakespeare's tragic plays are commonly cold and weak." It is a pity that Johnson does not refer us to particular passages in order to justify these general assertions. Johnson also says that, whenever Shakespeare tries to show his stores of knowledge, he arouses the reader's pity or resentment. Here again the public can themselves decide whether such is their response to any of the passages which Johnson might have in mind in this connection.

Johnson also accuses Shakespeare of getting entangled now and then with an unwieldy sentiment which he cannot well express. Here the reviewer, instead of saying anything to defend Shakespeare, carries the battle into the enemy's camp by saying that Johnson himself not seldom gets entangled with unwieldy sentiments thus creating difficulties for the readers.

Having attempted to prove the faults of Shakespeares as "being sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit," Johnson now dexterously changes sides and stands up in his defence against those who have accused him of violating the unities of action, place, and time, these unities being the "laws instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and of critics". "From the censure, which this irregularity may bring upon him", says Johnson, "I shall with due irreverence to that learning which I must oppose, adventure to try how I can defend him."

According to this reviewer, Johnson shows himself an indifferent advocate of Shakespeare in this particular respect. In fact, it may even be doubted whether Johnson was sufficiently acquainted with the nature and use of the drama to speak competently in a dispute relating to the violation or the observance of the three dramatic unities. Taking up the unity of action first, Johnson finds that Shakespeare has well enough preserved it. Shakespeare's plan has commonly a beginning, a middle, and an end ; one event is linked with another, and the conclusion follows by an easy consequence. Actually, however, when Aristotle spoke of the necessity of a dramatic plot having a beginning. a middle, and an end, he meant much more than Johnson finds in Shakespeare. Aristotle's meaning was thus explained by a commentator : "The causes and design of any action constitute the beginning of it : the effect of such causes, and the difficulties attending the execution of such design, are the middle of it ; and the unravelling or obviating these difficulties are the end of it." Without going deeper into this matter, this reviewer doubts whether any dramatic writer can be justly said to have preserved the unity of action if he has admittedly shown no regard to the unities of time and place. The unity of action, says the reviewer, is strictly connected with the other two unities. If any considerable time should elapse between the two parts of an action, or if the two parts of an action are divided by a change of place, we would be more apt to consider them as two distinct and different actions than as united parts of one and the same action.

The arguments advanced by Johnson (in paragraphs 50—55) at first sight appear plausible but they are false, or foreign to the purpose, in the opinion of this reviewer who finds the very assumption, on which Johnson proceeds, to be untrue. Says the reviewer : "The observation of these unities may be necessary without requiring the dramatic fable in its *materiality* to be either credited

or credible. It is not requisite, in order to justify the necessity of such observation, that the spectator should *really imagine* himself one hour in Alexandria and the next at Rome; or that he should actually *believe* the transactions of months and years to pass in a few hours. The dramatic unities, if necessary, are necessary to support the *apparent probability*, not the *actual credibility* of the drama." There is nothing so unbelievable as not to become probable being told, said Cicero. A similar effect can no doubt be produced by theatrical representation. It is the senses and the passions, not the imagination and understanding, that are in both these cases immediately affected. Of course, the spectators are always in their senses, and they know also, if the question were put to them, that the stage is only a stage, and the players are only players. But they are often so intent on the scene as to be absent with regard to everything else. A spectator, properly affected by a dramatic representation, makes no reflections about the fiction or the reality of it, so long as the action proceeds without grossly offending the senses. A person going to a London theatre to see the performance of a tragic play, say, *Venice Preserved*, knows, when he takes his seat, that he is in the theatre at London, and not at Venice. But as soon as the curtain goes up he begins to feel interested in the business of the scene, and he feels disposed to see and hear what is being said and done at the Rialto and other places in Venice. He does not then ask himself how he has arrived in Venice. He becomes so engrossed in what is happening on the stage, that he becomes far removed from his own character and situation. He sees the actor, Mr. Garrick, and the actress, Mrs. Cibber, on the stage, but they are no longer Mr. Garrick and Mrs. Cibber to him; they have become Jaffier and Belvidera of the play. The spectator is unquestionably deceived. But the deception goes no farther than the passions. It affects his sensibility, but not his understanding. It is by no means so powerful a delusion as to affect his *belief*. There is a kind of probability which is necessary in order to engage the attention of the senses and affect the passions, but this probability pertains to the *representation* and not the *materiality* of the story. Johnson fails to distinguish between the *understanding* and the *senses*, between the *judgment* and the *passions*.

Continuing his argument, Johnson admits that a dramatic representation is believed by the audience even when it is incredible. "It will be asked", says Johnson, "how the drama moves*, if it is not credited? It is credited with all the credit due to a drama". And Johnson employs sophistry to evade this evident contradiction. The drama it credited, says he, "whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original; as representing to the auditor what he would himself feel if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done. The reflection that strikes the heart is

*"moves" in the sense of "affects", or "arouses emotion".

not, that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed." The fact is that the spectators, who are most affected by a dramatic representation, are usually the least capable of making a comparison between the picture and the original. There are few spectators who can put themselves in the place of the characters represented, and fewer still who are moved because they reflect that they themselves are exposed to the evils represented on the stage. The spectators are moved by mere mechanical motives. They laugh and cry from mere sympathy at what a moment's reflection would very often prevent them from laughing or crying at all. They are merely passive ; their organs are in unison with those of the players on the stage ; and the convulsions of grief or laughter are purely involuntary. Their delight from tragedy proceeds not from their "consciousness of fiction" as Johnson affirms. This delight is the physical consequence of having the transient sense of pain or danger excited in them by sympathy, instead of actually and durably feeling it themselves. Hence that diminution of pain, which gives rise to the pleasing sensation which Burke called "delight". And hence it is that persons, who are most affected with the distress of a tragedy, are generally most delighted with its representation.

Johnson questions whether Shakespeare knew the unities and rejected them by design, or deviated from them by happy ignorance. It is impossible perhaps to settle this point. But, whether Shakespeare learnt the rules of the drama from the writings of the ancients or not, he was better versed in them than any of his successors that did. Shakespeare was the favourite child of Nature, and needed not the leading-strings of Aristotle. That does not, however, mean that Shakespeare's practice was incompatible with the precepts of Aristotle. Shakespeare could certainly be regarded as being above the laws of critics, but he might not yet deviate essentially from the general law of Aristotle even though he did not slavishly adopt Aristotle's particular rules. Indeed, the rule about the unity of place is widely regarded as being inappropriate, because the observance of this rule gives rise to more improbabilities than the violation of it.

According to this reviewer, Shakespeare has taken many objectionable liberties with the unity of action. Shakespeare, says this reviewer, has failed to pay due attention to the mechanical parts of composition. And this he has done in common with the first dramatic poets among the ancients. Nor is he, in this particular, to be justified by anything that Johnson has said : for the unity of action must not only be so far observed as to preserve the unity of character, but also so far as to preserve an apparent unity of design in the fable.

As to the unity of time, Johnson is also strangely mistaken, with regard to its essentiality. "A play read", says Johnson,

"affects the mind like a play acted. It is therefore evident that the action is not supposed to be real, and it follows that between the acts a longer or shorter time may be allowed to pass, and that no more account of space or duration is to be taken by the auditor of a drama, than by the reader of a narrative, before whom may pass in an hour the life of a hero, or the revolutions of an empire". Here again Johnson betrays a lack of adequate acquaintance with the business of the drama. A longer or shorter time may surely be allowed to pass between the acts, provided the unity of character is preserved, and nothing intervenes between the two parts of the action except the lapse of time. Yet there is a wide difference between the auditor of a drama and the reader of a narrative. Few things can be represented in the same time in which they are narrated ; so that it would be impossible to *represent* the whole life of a hero, or the revolutions of an empire, in the same time as the history of them might be read. It is indeed impossible for the action represented to seem to be longer than the actual time of representation ; for, as has been said above, it is the senses, and not imagination, that are immediately employed on the representation.

Johnson indeed says that "time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination ; a lapse of years is as easily conceived as a passage of hours. In contemplation we easily contract the time of real actions, and therefore willingly permit it to be contracted when we only see their imitation." In this argument of Johnson, the conclusion has little to do with the premises. During the actual representation of an action, we are not *contemplating*, but *observing* : and it is impossible for us either to shorten or to prolong the time of such representation ; but when the representation ceases, as at the end of an act, or even in shifting the scene, the attention of the senses is taken off and the imagination is at liberty to act during the interval. And hence we see that the frequent shifting of the scenes, though it may violate the restrictions of action and place, affords an opportunity of preserving the restriction of time, together with the first and grand rule of probability. The unity of time is, indeed, so far essential to the drama, that the successive actions represented must be confined to the time of actual representation ; although the intervals between them may be as long as the poet pleases, consistent with the preservation of the unity of character, and the unity of the design of the fable.

As regards the unity of place, the pretended necessity of it originally arose probably from the imperfect state of the ancient theatres. The French poets have absurdly involved themselves in the most ridiculous perplexities by adopting it to an unnecessary degree. It is, however, so far essential to the drama, as it is necessary to preserve the unity of action : for as the interval of time may in some cases be so great as to vary the personality, or destroy the

unity of character, so the transition of place may be so great as to destroy the unity of the action.

It appears, on the whole, that the unities are essential to the drama, though not in that degree as has been asserted by the critics ; so that the result of Johnson's inquiries concerning time is as erroneous as his supposition of the necessity on which they were founded.

In the *Preface*, Johnson also gives us an account of what he has done, or attempted to do himself, and to apologize for what he has not done or confessedly found himself unable to do. In more places than one in the course of this part of the *Preface*, Johnson betrays a consciousness of the want of application in his declared endeavours, as well as of the ill-success attending them There runs, indeed, through the whole of this *Preface*, such a mixed and inconsistent vein of praise and blame with regard to others, and of boasting and excuse to himself, that the *Preface* seems to be the production of a wavering pen. It would seem that the *Preface* was written by a man equally wearied and disgusted with a task, injudiciously undertaken and indolently pursued.

In his Edition of Shakespeare, Johnson has included the several prefaces of Pope, Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton, as also the dedication and preface of Heming and Condell, and Shakespeare's life by Rowe. Of Pope's notes, Johnson has retained the whole in order, as he says, that no fragment of so great a writer may be lost. However, as Pope's attempts on Shakespeare do him little credit, Johnson should have suppressed Pope's notes, at least those of them which were the most objectionable. Of Theobald's notes, the *weak, ignorant, mean, faithless, petulant, ostentatious* Theobald, Johnson has generally retained those which Theobald himself retained in his second edition ; and these are not a few nor unimportant. Of Hanmer's notes, Johnson professes to have inserted them all. To Warburton, he is still more indebted than to any of the preceding commentators, at least in point of quantity. To the author of the *Canons of Criticism* he is also equally obliged in point of quality ; but, for some unknown reason, Johnson has not in this particular case, fully acknowledged his obligations.

"As to Johnson's own notes, it possibly will not be expected they should be so numerous, or so important, as those he had an opportunity of borrowing from his predecessors : the reader will meet with some of them, however, here and there interspersed among the rest, and like the rest, *bona quaedam, mala, mediocra*. If the reader should complain that they are too few and insignificant, we can only impute their paucity and want of importance to a notion entertained by the Editor (the most unfortunate surely that ever entered into the head of a commentator !) that the reader is more, and better, pleased with what he finds out himself than with what the most sagacious scholiast can point out to him. But this

plea, if admitted, would of course be urged too far, and even supersede the task of any commentator at all. Indeed, Dr. Johnson seems full as little solicitous about the success of his annotations, as he could possibly be about the composing of them ; it is to be wished, however, for the sake of his own reputation, that he had always treated the poet with the same candour as he *professess* to have observed toward his brother commentators."

Here is an eminent critic's opinion : "In some respects more valuable (than the *Preface to Shakespeare*), and of more permanent use and interest, are Johnson's notes on the individual plays. If Johnson did not adequately carry out the textual principles he so admirably enunciated, he nevertheless consistently rejected the unjustified and "improving" emendation of earlier editors and made many sound and impressive suggestions on textual matters, based on his own wide reading in Elizabethan literature. His running comments on the characters are often illuminating, and his notes on the meaning of words and phrases (in which he drew on the reading he did for his dictionary) consistently sound and helpful. His comments on both parts of *Henry IV* have helped to lead modern criticism back to a juster understanding of the moral pattern of these plays. Johnson's edition of Shakespeare remains an edition which no later editor of Shakespeare can ignore.

Another critic has this to say : "There is little new matter in his *Preface*, except where he deals with his work as an editor. Its importance lies mainly in its being a conclusive summing up, by a strong, wise, and impartial mind, of a prolonged discussion. The question of Shakespeare's irregularities, though it had been losing interest, still required to be settled. They were felt to be right, and argued to be wrong Learned opinion was as a whole against them. Johnson's own *Irene* was regular to dullness, but in the *Rambler* he showed that he recognised the weight of the arguments on either side. He now set himself to reason out the whole question, and settled it for good. Henceforth no writer of any standing expressed his doubts on Shakespeare's irregularities, or had any doubts to express ; and when a change of fashion in criticism had turned these very irregularities into a stock theme of praise, the arguments which Johnson had advanced were used by a generation which did him too little justice."

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9

A Critical Evaluation of Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare"

I

The excellence of the *Preface*. The *Preface* to his Edition of Shakespeare is certainly the most masterly piece of Johnson's literary criticism : and it may still be doubted, after all that has been written about Shakespeare, whether the world can yet show any piece of criticism of the same length exhibiting so much truth and wisdom as Johnson's. The *Preface* shows all Johnson's gifts at their best : the lucidity, the virile energy, the individuality of his style ; the unique power of first placing himself on the level of the ordinary man and then lifting the ordinary man to his own level ; the firm insistence on life and reason, not learning or ingenuity, as the standard by which books are to be judged. Shakespeare who, whether life or Nature be his subject, shows plainly that he has seen with his own eyes, inspired Johnson the critic with more even than the latter's usual measure of sanity. Perhaps the very best things in Johnson's *Preface* (and in his notes) are the frequent summonings of ingenious sophistries to the test of a merciless common sense.

Freedom from slavery to rules. Those, who regard Johnson's criticism in general as merely a lifeless application of mechanical rules, should read again the famous passage in the *Preface* where he dismisses the claim of the unities of place and time to be necessary to the proper illusion of drama. Never did a critic show himself more free from a slavery to traditional rules. In Johnson's pages, at any rate, there is "always an appeal open," as he says, "from criticism to nature". And, though all his prejudices should have pushed him to a defence of the unities, he goes straight to the truth of experience, obtains there a decisive answer, and states it in a few pages of masterly reasoning. Johnson demolishes the airy castles of pedantry with the breath of the facts known to every theatre-goer. He shows that unity is required not for the sake of deceiving the spectators, which is impossible, but for the sake of bringing order into chaos, art into Nature, and the immensity of life within limits

that can be bounded by the powers of the human mind. The unity of action, which assists the mind, is therefore vital. The unities of time and place, which are apparently meant to deceive the mind, are empty impostures. For, "the truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and the players are only players"; "the delight proceeds from our consciousness of fiction: if we thought murders and treasons real, they will please no more."

Historical and comparative point of view. But this is simply one especially famous passage in an essay which is full of matter from the first page to the last. It says little, of course, of the sublime poetry of Shakespeare, and it cannot anticipate that kind of criticism which Geothe and Coleridge have taught us to expect from every writer about Shakespeare. The day for that had not yet come. Johnson, who was among the first to suggest the historical and comparative point of view in criticism, himself says in the very *Preface*: "Every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his own particular opportunities." Johnson should likewise be judged by the state of the age in which he lived. He performed his task with regard to Shakespeare so admirably that what he said can never be out of date. It was not, in Johnson's day, superfluous to insist on the greatness of Shakespeare. If it has become superfluous now, no small share of that result may be attributed to Johnson. Never surely has the central praise of Shakespeare, as the master of truth and universality, been better set forth than by Johnson. In a series of luminous and eloquent paragraphs Johnson tries Shakespeare by the tests of time, of nature, of universality, and finds him supreme in all. Our faculties are stimulated as we read these paragraphs: our ears are delighted, our powers of admiration quickened, and our reason convinced.

Quotable sentences. Nor did Johnson ever write anything richer in characteristic and memorable sentences, fit to be quoted and thought over by themselves:

"Nothing can please many and please long but just representations of general nature."

"Shakespeare always makes nature predominant over accident .. His story requires Romans but he thinks only on men."

"There is a kind of intellectual remoteness necessary for the comprehension of any great work."

"Nature (that is, genius, or what a man inherits at birth) gives no man knowledge."

"Upon the whole all pleasure consists in variety."

"Love has no great influence upon the sum of life."

The limited role of love in Shakespearean drama It is startling to find Johnson anticipating Bernard Shaw, and more startling still to be told in an essay on the author of *Romeo and Juliet* that love "has little operation in the drama of a poet who caught his ideas from the living world." It is, indeed, a striking fact, little observed, that Shakespeare wrote so many plays in which the love-interest hardly has any place.

No rash emendations. The service which Johnson rendered to the study of Shakespeare is by no means confined to the general observations which he makes in the *Preface*. Johnson, more than most other critics, called criticism back from paths that led nowhere, and suggested directions in which discoveries might be made. The most marked contrast between him and earlier critics of Shakespeare was his caution about altering the received text. He first checked the tide of rash emendation, and the curb which he imposed on himself has continued ever since. The case for moderation in this respect has never been better stated than in his own words : "It has been my settled principle that the reading of the ancient books is probably true, and therefore is not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity or mere improvement of the sense. For though much credit is not due to the fidelity, nor any to the judgment of the first publishers, yet they who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right than we who read it only by imagination."

Other merits of the *Preface*. (*i*) In several other matters, Johnson in passing dropped an idea which matured in other minds to the great advantage of criticism. "Shakespeare", he says, "has more allusions than other poets to the traditions and superstitions of the vulgar, which must therefore be traced before he can be understood." Few critical observations have had a larger result than this, and the same may be said of Johnson's pregnant hint about the frequent necessity of looking for Shakespeare's meaning "among the sports of the field."

(*ii*) Johnson neither over-estimated the importance nor under-estimated the difficulties of the critic of Shakespeare. He treats the quarrels of commentators with contempt, and with his usual sense of the true scale of things : "It is not easy to discover from what cause the acrimony of a scholiast can naturally proceed. The subjects to be discussed by him are of very small importance : they involve neither property nor liberty." In another place, he characteristically bids his angry colleagues to join with him in remembering amidst their triumphs over the "nonsensical" opinions of dead rivals that "we likewise are men and shall soon be among the dead ourselves." Johnson recognises also that "notes are necessary evils" and advises the young reader to begin by ignoring them and reading through Shakespeare without any external help.

(iii) Johnson puts aside with just indignation Pope's haughty remark about the "dull duty of an editor". Johnson gives an admirable summary of what that dull duty is, and then declares that one part of it alone, the business of conjectural criticism, "demands more than humanity possesses." Yet it is that part of his function, the part which appeals most to vanity, that he exercised with the most sparing caution. He saw that it was not in emendation but in interpretation that the critic could now be most useful. For the last task the sanity of his mind, though sometimes leaning too much to prose, gave him peculiar qualifications. No one can have used any of the Variorum Shakespeares without being struck again and again by the masterly way in which Johnson penetrates through the thicket of obscurities raised by Shakespeare's involved language and his critics' fanciful explanations, and brings back for us in plain words the undoubted meaning of many a difficult passage. He is a master of that rare art, the prose paraphrase of poetry. The perfect lucidity of his notes makes them always a pleasure to read: and writers of notes are not usually masters of language. Shakespeare has had subtler and more poetical critics than Johnson; but no one has equalled the insight, sobriety, lucidity, and finality which Johnson shows in his own field.

II

The contemporary criticism and the *Preface*. Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare's plays was received with the greatest interest, and helped to confirm Johnson's reputation as a scholar and man of letters. It was felt that in his *Preface* he had summed up Shakespeare once and for all in terms of contemporary criticism. Although today we make the mistake of thinking that Shakespearean criticism had its real beginning with Coleridge and the other romantics, the fact remains that Shakespeare's supremacy was recognised well enough by Dryden and other critics who came after Dryden. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, we find Edward Gibbon referring to the "idolatry for the gigantic genius of Shakespeare, which is inculcated from our infancy as the first duty of an Englishman." Nevertheless, there was a widespread feeling that, although Shakespeare displayed his enormous powers as an interpreter of nature, his works would have been even more admirable if they had been more regular in form and nearer to what was regarded as correctness.

Johnson's broader view. Johnson took a broader view of Shakespeare than most of the earlier critics. He made a forceful reply to those who denigrated Shakespeare for mingling comedy with tragedy and neglecting the unities of place, time, and action. There is always, he wrote, "an appeal open from criticism to nature". And again: "whether Shakespeare knew the unities, and rejected them by design, or deviated from them by happy ignorance, it is, I think, impossible to decide, and useless to inquire." However, he did not approach Shakespeare in the reverential frame of mind adopted by

the critics of the nineteenth century. He would never have agreed with Coleridge that Shakespeare's judgment was even mere wonderful than his genius. On the contrary, he found faults in Shakespeare's plays sufficient to damn a lesser poet. Only it was essential that these flaws and blemishes should be regarded in their true proportion. "The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades, and scented with flowers; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and roses; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity."

Shakespeare's glaring fault. For Johnson, the most glaring fault in Shakespeare's plays was the absence of a didactic element: "He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose...This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time or place." Now Johnson as a man and as a Christian had every right to believe that "there are laws of higher authority than those of criticism". But as a critic he was wrong in thinking that a poet had a duty to preach a specific moral through his work. The very objectivity which offended Johnson is now regarded as one of Shakespeare's most prominent merits. Like Keats, "we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us."

The chief defect of Johnson's criticism. But the chief defect in Johnson's criticism, by modern standards, was his insensibility to the overtones of Shakespeare's sublimest poetry. He was not unresponsive to either atmosphere or tragic emotion*. But he had little feeling for Shakespeare's power of transcending common speech, and his power of adding an indescribable beauty and significance to the plain meaning of the words. It is Johnson's deficiency in this respect that makes him think that Shakespeare is far greater in comedy than in tragedy: "In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comic, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature."

The distinction of Johnson's criticism. Yet the *Preface* is, on the whole, an inspiring piece of work. It includes some of the finest and the soundest things that have ever been said on

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* For instance, of the dagger soliloquy in *Macbeth*, Johnson wrote: "He that peruses Shakespeare, looks round alarmed, and starts to find himself alone." To a note on Desdemona's death-scence, he added: "I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene. It is not to be endured."

Shakespeare. Johnson emphasised the everyday aspect of the plays, and he wrote with warmth and lucid approbation of the life, the bustle, the variety, the stress of character, and the stir of passion, which made Shakespeare above all others the poet of nature, and thus ensured his lasting popularity ; for the mind, said Johnson, can only repose on the stability of truth. Later commentators of Shakespeare have often been hampered in their criticism by too stiff a scholarship or too loose an admiration. Johnson's criticism is free from either of these defects. Adam Smith was wholly correct in describing Johnson's *Preface* as "the most *manly* piece of criticism that was ever published in any country."

Johnson's editorial method. In tackling the problems of textual criticism, Johnson showed the same robust good sense. He was far in advance of the previous editors—Rowe, Pope, Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton—though much of his work in this field was soon superseded by Steevens and Malone. He recognised the fact that, owing to Shakespeare's failure to publish his own plays, the original Folio and Quarto editions were full of obscurities and possible corruptions. But he at the same time objected to his predecessors' habit of "regulating" the text by the criterion of eighteenth century taste. He pointed out that too often an emendation was merely the substitution of a word which seemed to the editor more intelligible or more elegant than Shakespeare's own. For instance, when the King in *Hamlet*, speaking of Polonius's death, says :

> and we have done but greenly
> In hugger mugger to inter him,

Pope and his successors had substituted 'private' for 'hugger mugger.' Johnson restored the original reading, and commented : "That the words now replaced are better, I do not undertake to prove ; it is sufficient that they are Shakespeare's. If phraseology is to be changed as words grow uncouth by disuse, or gross by vulgarity, the history of every language will be lost ; we shall no longer have the words of any author ; and, as these alterations will be often unskilfully made, we shall in time have very little of his meaning."

Johnson's sound principles Johnson did not, of course, have the specialised knowledge that is thought necessary in our times in an editor. Also, because of his natural laziness and his defective eyesight he was unfitted for the close work of collation. But we must not forget that the principles he arrived at by native intelligence have much in common with those accepted by present-day editors, after nearly two centuries of scholarship. The modern view about the original texts, Quarto or Folio, was anticipated by Johnson when he said in his *Preface* : "I collated them (the Folios) all at the beginning, but afterwards used only the first. It has been my settled principle that the reading of the ancient books is probably true, and therefore is not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity, or mere improvement of the sense. I have

always suspected that the reading is right, which requires many words to prove it wrong ; and the emendation wrong, that cannot without so much labour appear to be right."

Johnson's notes. As for Johnson's general and explanatory notes, they are distinguished at their best by a freshness of mind and a contempt for pedantry. He enunciated a sound principle when he urged the reader to read the plays first, and then only to read the commentators.

III

Johnson's assessment of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson's *Preface* is a famous document. The *Preface* and the notes on Shakespeare's plays supplied by Johnson add up to a body of criticism very different from the native approach of most other contemporary critics. Like his predecessors, Johnson sets out in a traditional way to examine "beauties" and "defects", to apportion praise and blame. But unlike them, he also succeeds in conveying his own individual response to the plays. For this reason his assessment is more complex and sophisticated, and also more interesting.

Shakespeare, the poet of nature. Shakespeare, says Johnson, "is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature ; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." The phrase "poet of nature" carries, in fact, favourable aesthetic and moral implications. Yet this praise at first looks paradoxical both because Johnson apparently goes on to deny individuality to Shakespeare's characters, and because he states, later in the *Preface*, that Shakespeare seems to write without any moral purpose. When Johnson says that in the writings of other poets the character is too often an individual and in those of Shakespeare a character is commonly a species, he is not, however, maintaining that the Shakespearean character is left unindividualised. He also says in the *Preface* that perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other. In the notes (of which the most famous are probably those on Falstaff and Polonius), he shows that he read the plays with a well-defined conception of individual characters. Pope had said that "every single character in Shakespeare is as much an individual as those in life itself" ; and Johnson praised Pope highly as a critic of Shakespeare. In using the word "species" as opposed to the word "individual", Johnson clearly intended the rounded or three-dimensional. It was the life-like authenticity of Shakespeare's characterisation that prompted Johnson's praise of him as the poet of nature. The moral implications of this phrase, "the poet of nature", are also to be explained in terms of this authenticity. Johnson complains of Shakespeare's seeming lack of moral purpose. Yet he also implies that by holding up to his readers "a faithful mirror of manners and

of life" Shakespeare invites them to look more deeply into human nature. That Shakespearean drama conveyed a favourable view of human nature was attested by some of the eighteenth-century writers. Johnson, who was an insistent moralist and habitual investigator of human motives, would not have ignored this aspect of the moral relevance of Shakespeare's art. Many of Johnson's notes on individual characters, like the one on Othello, were intended to emphasise aspects of human behaviour, which an intelligent audience could glean from the plays.

The alleged lack of moral purpose. Johnson's remark about Shakespeare's seeming lack of moral purpose was based on the kind of moral indifference that he detected in the ending of some of the plays. His own view of human nature was pessimistic. He believed that the fear of punishment was a necessary stimulus to virtue, and that men would desist from evil only if justice was seen to be operating in the world. As a strongly moralistic critic, he expected a work of art to demonstrate the same kind of strict justice which he wanted to find in real life. For this reason he was particularly offended that Shakespeare had allowed "the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause." Indeed, the ending of *King Lear* disturbed him deeply. Johnson seems to agree with Dennis who maintained that the justice a dramatist meted out to his characters ought to be a type of God's final judgment. The death of the apparently innocent Cordelia could not therefore have been approved by Johnson.

Johnson's preference for the comedies. Many of the remarks in the *Preface* and the notes are to be related to that set of literary and dramatic conventions which the eighteenth-century endorsed and accepted. The eighteenth-century critics regarded a play as a convincing imitation of real events and real people. Hence they wanted the soliloquies to be properly motivated, and not just addressed to the audience. Hence also they thought it inappropriate that a character suffering the stress of strong emotion should use highly-wrought imagery or employ word-play in his speeches. It is this view which explains to a great extent Johnson's surprising stricture on the tragic plays of Shakespeare : "In tragedy Shakespeare often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity ; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comic, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mood of thinking congenial to his nature. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and the language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct."

Johnson's departure from rules. In some respects, Johnson's acceptance of certain arbitrary conventions was as literal as

that of his age. Yet in two important respects he defended Shakespearean drama with such emphasis that he has been hailed as "an outright dissenter against the neo-classic rules and proprieties." In justifying Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic scenes, Johnson forcefully declares that "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature." Less original, but no less forcible, was his defence of Shakespeare's violation of the unities of time and place. He regarded these unities as spurious and he held that those who supported them failed to distinguish between the real world and the imaginary world of the play. As an editor, he made common-sense adjustments designed to accommodate lapses of time and changes of place to a more convenient distribution of acts and scenes.

"Johnson read Shakespeare's plays as dramatic narratives, not as thematic poems, and displayed a lively and discriminating, if not decidedly poetic, intelligence in grappling with plot and character. His reasoned estimate of Shakespeare is in no sense grudging ; indeed, his cool and dispassionate objectivity is ultimately compelling and persuasive. Moreover, the observation that Johnson on Shakespeare tells us as much about Johnson as Shakespeare is a testimony not so much to his literary pre-conceptions or prejudices as to the over-all coherence and personally realised quality of his critical dialectic."

Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare's plays, planned over many years, was finally published in October, 1765. In his *Proposals for Printing, by Subscription, the Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, Johnson had stated his intention of producing a good text, explaining obscure passages, and providing a "more rational approbation" of Shakespeare. He showed sound sense in disregarding all Folios after the First, but his Edition is defective for its concept of textual authority largely because he failed to take the texts of the various Quartos into consideration. Nor did prevailing attitudes to poetic language and dramatic speech encourage him to produce, by modern standards, a good text. Most eighteenth-century editors had felt justified in suggesting emendation wherever a text seemed to them corrupt. In this respect, however, Johnson is far less culpable than many of his predecessors. His extraordinarily wide knowledge of the language not only prompted some discerning explanations of particular passages, but (especially by comparison with the host of fanciful conjectures suggested by Shakespeare's previous editor, William Warburton) combined with his innate scepticism to limit the number of proposed changes within reasonable bounds.

The style of the *Proposals for Printing the Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* and of the 1765 *Preface* suggests a certain gusto of mood. Johnson's Shakespeare was the seventh edition since the early Folios—the others being those by Rowe, Pope,

Theobald, Hanmer, an unknown editor, and Warburton. Johnson followed his six predecessors fairly closely, not only in form but in substance. All had written prefaces, which Johnson reprinted in his own Edition. Johnson follows them, in his own *Preface*, in insisting on his own labours in collating texts and in praising Shakespeare's genius for its adherence to nature. But we do expect an editor to have studied his fore-runners, and to have learned from them.

IV

Seven sub-divisions of the *Preface*. Johnson's *Preface* is in essence a brilliant exercise in descriptive criticism with a major essay in theoretical criticism, the refutation of the unities of time and place inserted midway, and a long appendix on editorial methods. The *Preface* is divisible into seven parts : (*i*) Shakespeare considered as a poet of nature ; (*ii*) a defence of Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic scenes ; (*iii*) Shakespeare's "central" style ; (*iv*) Shakespeare's defects ; (*v*) a defence of Shakespeare's violation of the unities of time and place ; (*vi*) the historical background of Shakespeare, and (*vii*) comments on the editorial methods of others and Johnson's explanation of his own method.

Johnsonian theory. The *Preface* is firmly grounded, in its opening pages, in Johnsonian theory. Shakes eare, we are told, happily occupies a classic position, like an Ancient, by virtue of his relative antiquity and "continuance of esteem". Shakespeare can by now claim "the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration." He must therefore be great. And his greatness is of a familiar neo-classic kind. Shakespeare is, *par excellence*, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not individuals, but species.

The inconsistencies in the *Preface*. Three major inconsistencies are to be found in the *Preface* as a whole. ***First***, tragi-comedy is justified on conflicting grounds. Dryden too had occasionally defended such a mingling, but only as the occasion suited. He had condemned it too. And, considering that the neo-classic critics had forgotten the Renaissance distinction between tragedy and comedy, it must indeed have seemed important to justify Shakespeare's mixture of serious and ridiculous scenes. But it is not enough to justify tragi-comedy on Dryden's grounds that contraries set off each other, and then to excuse "the rules of criticism" on the grounds that "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature", and that the mingled drama provided both pleasure and instruction. Such a way of arguing is a characteristically Johnsonian use of the escape-clause.

Second, the extravagant praise of Shakespeare as supremely the poet of nature in the first part of the *Preface* becomes discredited in the light of some of the disparaging remarks that occur later :

"As we owe everything to him, he owes something to us." "We fix our eyes upon his graces, and turn them from his deformities, and endure in him what we should in another loathe and despise." "He has perhaps not one play which, if it were exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to the conclusion." Such remarks considerably dilute the admiration and veneration of the opening passages and do, in fact, contradict the earlier eulogy.

Third, while on one hand Johnson praises Shakespeare as the poet of the central style, on the other he points out, in the list of Shakespeare's defects, Shakespeare's "tumour", his "weak" declamation, and "unwieldy sentiment". Having said that Shakespeare seeks his style of expression in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, Johnson almost contradicts himself by pointing out what he considers a stylistic defect.

Johnson's sharp perception and logical reasoning. Thus, more than once, the *Preface* seems torn apart by Johnson's failure to qualify either his praise or his blame. As a result of this failure, the virtues and defects enumerated by him reveal the inconsistencies pointed out above. But there are in the *Preface* comments showing Johnson's sharp and brilliant perception. Such is his criticism of the unities of time and place and the assertion of the special status of dramatic illusion. This part of the *Preface* is a model of logical demonstration, and it is rich in those effects of mock-simplicity which Johnson liked so much to show : "It will be asked how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited* with all the credit due to a drama. It is credited, whenever it moves†, as a just picture of a real original." Johnson's exposure of the unities is one of the great moments of liberating intelligence in English criticism.

Historical view. Johnson shows, too, a superb historical understanding in his exposition of editorial principles, and also in his repeated appeals to the study of background as an antidote to neo-classical rule-of-thumb. The following extracts from the *Preface* illustrate the point :

"......works tentative and experimental must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man, as it is discovered in a long succession of endeavours.**

"Every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived, and with his own particular opportunities..........is always busy to discover the instruments as well as to survey the workmanship, to know how much is to be ascribed to original powers, and how much to casual and adventitious help‡."

**credited*—believed.

†*moves*—arouses emotion in the audience.

**Paragraph 3 of the text.

‡Paragraph 64 of the text.

These observations foreshadow most nineteenth-century historical criticism in its characteristic excesses as well as in its characteristic triumphs. Although Johnson's particular historical judgments may be naive*, there can be no doubt that he views poetry as a tradition or evolution, "a long succession".

V

The neo classical standards of Johnson. Inasmuch as it is strictly impersonal, Johnson's Shakespearean criticism is close to neo-classical standards. The gist of his eulogy of Shakespeare is also neo-classical in essence. He elevates Shakespeare to his throne among poets on the ground that Shakespeare is the poet of nature, that is, of human nature. Shakespeare's drama is the mirror of life. He shows us human existence as it is, so that :

"he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies, by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions."

This is the central area, or the backbone, of Johnson's whole discussion of Shakespeare. In this area his estimate of Shakespeare is the same as his estimate of Homer. In the Life of Pope, Johnson remarks :

"Minute inquiries into the force of words are less necessary in translating Homer than other poets, because his positions are general and his representations natural, with very little dependence on local or temporary customs, on those changeable scenes of artificial life which, by mingling original with accidental notions, and crowding the mind with images which time effaces, produce ambiguity in diction and obscurity in books. To this open display of unadulterated nature it must be ascribed that Homer has fewer passages of doubtful meaning than any other poet either in the learned or in modern languages."

Shakespeare and Homer. Homer, in other words, has done what the poet, according to Imlac in *Rasselas*, must always do : he has gone beyond the locally accidental and incidental, and arrived at the basic truth about human life. Shakespeare has done the same :

"His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world ; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers ; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions : they are the genuine progeny of common humanity; such as the

*He says, for instance : "The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity......" (Paragraph 65)

world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species." **(Paragraph 8)**

To say that, in drawing a character, Shakespeare makes him not just an individual but a whole species is the height of praise from a classical point of view.

Discussion of the unities. Johnson's *Preface* is neo-classical, then, in its praise of Shakespeare's truth to general nature. It is neo-classical also in its preference for broad philosophical generalisations which have nothing to do with historicity. When Johnson has to defend Shakespeare's disregard of the unities, he does not do so along historical lines. He does not say that Shakespeare was working in a popular medium, which had simply not heard of Aristotle or of the Italian Renaissance critics who had hardened Aristotle's dicta into directives. Probably Johnson [illegible] have considered such pleading as no defence at all but a mere excuse. Johnson defends Shakespeare in this respect by a direct appeal to the nature of imaginative literature, by analysing what it is and why it affects us.

Johnson's discussion of the unities is not, of course, the last word on the subject. This discussion is rather unsatisfactory in its concentration on the problem of credibility rather than of aesthetic effect. The unities of time and place are not, surely, devices to lend realism to drama. They are devices to concentrate emotion, to make a frame for the picture. A shift from Alexandria to Rome, if objectionable at all, is objectionable because it disperses attention and dilutes the effect that has been built up in the scene that has gone before. Johnson has thus based his argument on a fallacy by saying that the spectator who can believe the stage to be Alexandria at one moment may also believe it to be Rome the next moment. But Johnson moves to an important truth, and one moreover that arises naturally from his effective view of literature, when he says : "It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama. It is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original ; as representing to the auditor what he would himself feel, if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done."

Uniformity of sentiment. We are moved by imaginative literature, Johnson says, because we identify ourselves with the situations we find there. Hence we venerate a great writer because we feel that he knows and understands us. We can read his work and find there the materials for self knowledge. Later, in his *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson said much the same thing in his judgment of the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. These

writers, he says, were not successful in representing or moving the affections because "they had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and the pleasure of other minds". The artist, Johnson means to say, sees things which are fundamentally the same which the rest of us see, but the artist sees them more clearly, more profoundly, and more sharply. The artist's representation of life therefore makes us feel what we remember to have felt before, but now we feel it with great increase of sensibility.

Shakespeare, then, has this "uniformity of sentiment", the power of feeling our normal human emotions at a greater depth and intensity, so that to meet them again in his dramas is beneficial, and is an enhancement of life. This part of Johnson's estimate is in keeping with the familiar neo-classical criteria. It is in agreement with the well-known paragraph in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) :

"To begin, then, with Shakespeare ; he was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him." Ben Johnson had said much the same thing : "Thou wert not of an age, but for all time."

The mode of modern historical criticism. But there is another side to Johnson's criticism. He is fully aware that Shakespeare belonged to a particular age and that, for this reason, he stands very much in need of the services of a commentator or annotator. After the essentially Renaissance tone of the earlier pages of his *Preface*, Johnson switches to the mode of modern historical criticism when he reminds his readers that :

"Every man's performance, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived, and with his own particular opportunities. . . The Palaces of Peru or Mexico were certainly mean and incommodious inhabitations, if compared to the houses of European monarchs ; yet who could forbear to view them with astonishment, who remembered that they were built without the use of iron." **(Paragraph 64)**

No personal prejudices. Johnson's work on Shakespeare is entirely free of any of the personal deflections that occur in his comments on Milton. He would obviously have no quarrel with Shakespeare's social and political views*, in so far as these are clearly expressed in the poet's writings. Shakespeare's ideal of a harmonious political and personal life based on considerations of social position and status is very much the same as Johnson's ideal of a maximum of personal freedom within a framework of "subordination".

*One reason for Johnson's adverse criticism of Milton was Milton's social and political views which were extremely uncongenial to Johnson's temperament.

Johnson not interested in Shakespeare's inner life or development. Of Shakespeare as a person, Johnson seems to have had no impression worth writing down. Johnson, indeed, wrote little about Shakespeare the man as distinct from the author. He has nothing to say about the non-dramatic poetry of Shakespeare and therefore does not get entangled in a discussion of the identity of the dark lady or the handsome young man of the sonnets. A modern critic, who does not concern himself with those matters, might still conceive of Shakespeare's inner, imaginative life as a continuous process worth probing into and describing. But Johnson does not even do this. He either generalises about Shakespeare's work as a whole, as in the *Preface*, or comments on the plays separately one by one in the order in which he found them grouped in the First Folio edition. . But he shows no interest in the chronological order of the plays or in any question arising therefrom. The order in which Shakespeare wrote his plays could only be established by research (since the Folio gives no hint of it), and Johnson disliked the drudgery of research. What is puzzling to modern eyes is Johnson's apparent lack of concern with this matter. The modern critic thinks of Shakespeare's work as the record of a spiritual journey, in which he passed through one period after another. The modern critic can hardly think of any one play of his without automatically thinking of others which are similar to it in tone or atmosphere. To think of *Twelfth Night* is also to think of *As You Like It*; to think of *A Winter's Tale* is also to think of *The Tempest*; and so on. But Johnson simply goes through the plays one by one, reacting to each separately and making no distinction between the earlier and the later plays. (He does, however, treat the History plays as a sequence). And there is, after all, something to be gained from Johnson's procedure : it breaks a habitual mould of our thinking.

"His *Preface* is regarded by some critics as Johnson's most brilliant performance. Some of his judgments on Shakespeare are astonishingly unlike our own, some of his prejudices almost perverse, but he rises greatly to his great occasion, and there is no piece of general criticism on the same scale that approaches it. He exhibits the excellence of Shakespeare in its fullness and grandeur. Perhaps his preference for the comedies, which no modern critic would endorse, might well have been echoed by Shakespeare himself in certain moods."

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Johnson's Preface to his Edition of Shakespeare's Plays (1765)

(THE TEXT*)

1. THAT praises are without reason lavished on the dead, and that the honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity, is a complaint likely to be always continued by those who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox ; or those who being forced by disappointment upon consolatory expedients, are willing to hope from posterity what the present age refuses and flatter themselves that the regard which is denied by envy will be at last bestowed by time.

2. Antiquity, like every other quality that attracts the notice of mankind, has undoubtedly votaries that reverence it, not from reason, but from prejudice. Some seem to admire indiscrimately whatever has been long preserved, without considering that time has sometimes cooperated with chance ; all perhaps are more willing to honour past than present excellence ; and the mind contemplates genius through the shades of age, as the eye surveys the sun through artificial opacity. The great contention of criticism is to find the faults of the moderns and the beauties of the ancients. While an author is yet living, we estimate his powers by his worst performance ; and when he is dead, we rate them by his best.

3. To works, however, of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative ; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared ; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. As among the

*The paragraphs have been numbered for the convenience of the student.

works of nature no man can properly call a river deep or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains and many rivers; so, in the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. Demonstration immediately displays its power and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man, as it is discovered in a long succession of endeavours. Of the first building that was raised, it might be with certainty determined that it was round or square, but whether it was spacious or lofty must have been referred to time. The Pythagorean scale of numbers was at once discovered to be perfect; but the poems of Homer we yet know not to transcend the common limits of human intelligence but by remarking that nation after nation, and century after century, has been able to do little more than transpose his incidents, new-name his characters, and paraphrase his sentiments.

4. The reverence due to writings that have long subsisted arises, therefore, not from any credulous confidence in the superior wisdom of past ages or gloomy persuasion of the degeneracy of mankind, but is the consequence of acknowledged and indubitable positions, that what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood.

5. The poet of whose works, I have undertaken the revision may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration. He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit. Whatever advantages he might once derive from personal allusions, local customs, or temporary opinions have for many years been lost; and every topic of merriment or motive of sorrow which the modes of artificial life afforded him now only obscure the scenes which they once illuminated. The effects of favour and competition are at an end; the tradition of his friendships and his enmities has perished; his works support no opinion with arguments nor supply any faction with invectives; they can neither indulge vanity nor gratify malignity; but are read without any other reason than the desire of pleasure and are therefore praised only as pleasure is obtained yet; thus unassisted by interest or passion, they have passed through variations of taste and changes of manners, and, as they devolved from one generation to another have received new honours at every transmission.

6. But because human judgement, though it be gradually gaining upon certainty, never becomes infallible; and approbation, though long continued, may yet be only the approbation of prejudice or fashion; it is proper to inquire by what peculiarities of excellence Shakespeare has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen.

7. Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest ; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.

8. Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world ; by the peculiarities of studies or professions which can operate but upon small numbers ; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions ; they are the genuine progeny of common hamanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.

9. It is from this wide extension of design that no much instruction is derived. It is this which fills the plays of Shakespeare with practical axioms and domestic wisdom. It was said of Euripides that every verse was a precept ; and it may be said of Shakespeare that from his works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence. Yet his real power is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable and the tenor of his dialogue ; and he that tries to recommend him by select quotations will succeed like the pedant in Hierocles, who, when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen.

10. It will not easily be imagined how much Shakespeare excels in accommodating his sentiments to real life but by comparing him with other authors. It was observed of the ancient schools of declamation that the more diligently they were frequented, the more was the student disqualified for the world, because he found nothing there which he should ever meet in any other place. The same remark may be applied to every stage but that of Shakespeare. The theatre, when it is under any other direction, is peopeld by such characters as were never seen, conversing in a language which was never heard, upon topics which will never arise in the commerce of mankind. But the dialogue of this author is often so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences.

11. Upon every other stage the universal agent is love, by whose power all good and evil is distributed and every action quickened or retarded. To bring a lover, a lady, and a rival into the fable; to entangle them in contradictory obligations, perplex them with oppositions of interest, and harass them with violence of desires inconsistent with each other; to make them meet in rapture and part in agony, to fill their mouths with hyperbolical joy and outrageous sorrow, to distress them as nothing human ever was distressed, to deliver them as nothing human ever was delivered, is the business of a modern dramatist. For this, probability is violated, life is misrepresented, and language is depraved. But love is only one of many passions; and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet who caught his ideas from the living world and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew that any other passion, as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity.

12. Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other. I will not say with Pope that every speech may be assigned to the proper speaker, because many speeches there are which have nothing characteristical; but perhaps, though some may be equally adapted to every person, it will be difficult to find any that can be properly transferred from the present possessor to another claimant. The choice is right, when there is reason for choice.

13. Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolical or aggravated characters, by fabulosu and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion. Even where the agency is supernatural, the dialogue is level with life. Other writers disguise the most natural passions and most frequent incidents; so that he who contemplates them in the book will not know them in the world. Shakespeare approximates the remote and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but, if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned; and it may be said that he has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exigences, but as it would be found in trials to which it cannot be exposed.

14. This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespearé, that his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may

estimate the transactions of the world and a confessor predict the progress of the passions.

15. His adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of critics who form their judgements upon narrower principles. Dennis and Rymer think his Romans not sufficiently Roman; and Voltaire censures his kings as not completely royal. Dennis is offended that Menenius, a senator of Rome, should play the buffoon; and Voltaire perhaps thinks decency violated when the Danish usurper is represente as a drunkard. But Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and, if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men. He knew that Rome, like every other city, had men of all dispositions; and wanting a buffoon, he went into the senate house for that which the senate house would certainly have afforded him. He was inclined to show an usurper and a murderer not only odious, but despicable; he therefore added drunkenness to his other qualities, knowing that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings. These are the petty cavils of petty minds; a poet overlooks the casual distinction of country and condition, as a painter, satisfied with the figure, neglects the drapery.

16. The censure which he has incurred by mixing comic and tragic scenes, as it extends to all his works, deserves more consideration. Let the fact be first stated and then examined.

17. Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.

18. Out of this chaos of mingled purposes and casualties the ancient poets, according to the laws which custom had prescribed, selected some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities; some the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter occurrences; some the terrors of distress, and some the gaieties of prosperity. Thus rose the two modes of imitation, known by the names of *tragedy* and *comedy*, compositions intended to promote different ends by contrary means, and considered as so little allied that I do not recollect among the Greeks or Romans a single writer who attempted both.

19. Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and, in the successive evolutions of the design, sometime produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.

20. That this is a practice contrary to the rules of criticism will be readily allowed ; but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. The end of writing is to instruct ; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alternations of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life, by showing how great machinations and slender designs may promote or obviate one another, and the high and the low cooperate in the general system by unavoidable concatenation.

21. It is objected that by this change of scenes the passions are interrupted in their progression, and that the principal event, being not advanced by a due gradation of preparatory incidents, wants at last the power to move, which constitutes the perfection of dramatic poetry. This reasoning is so specious that it is received as true even by those who in daily experience feel it to be false. The interchanges of mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitudes of passion. Fiction cannot move so much but that the attention may be easily transferred ; and though it must be allowed that pleasing melancholy be sometimes interrupted by unwelcome levity, yet let it be considered likewise that melancholy is often not pleasing, and that the disturbance of one man may be the relief of another ; that different auditors have different habitudes ; and that, upon the whole, all pleasure consists in variety.

22. The players, who in their edition divided our author's works into comedies, histories, and tragedies, seem not to have distinguished the three kinds by any very exact or definite ideas.

23. An action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents, in their opinion constituted a comedy. This idea of a comedy continued long amongst us : and plays were written which, by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies today and comedies tomorrow.

24. Tragedy was not in those times a poem of more general dignity or elevation than comedy ; it required only a calamitous conclusion, with which the common criticism of that age was satisfied, whatever lighter pleasure it afforded in its progress.

25. History was a series of actions, with no other than chronological succession, independent on each other, and without any tendency to introduce or regulate the conclusion. It is not always

very nicely distinguished from tragedy. There is not much nearer approach to unity of action in the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra* than in the history of *Richard the Second*. But a history might be continued through many plays; as it had no plan, it had no limits.

26. Through all these denominations of the drama, Shakespeare's mode of composition is the same : an interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time and exhilarated at another. But whatever be his purpose, whether to gladden or depress, or to conduct the story, without vehemence or emotion, through tracts of easy and familiar dialogue, he never fails to attain his purpose ; as he commands us, we laugh or mourn, or sit silent with quiet expectation, in tranquillity without indifference.

27. When Shakespeare's plan is understood, most of the criticisms of Rymer and Voltaire vanish away. The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety, by two sentinels ; Iago bellows at Brabantio's window without injury to the scheme of the play, though in terms which a modern audience would not easily endure ; the character of Polonius is seasonable and useful ; and the grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause.

28. Shakespeare engaged in dramatic poetry with the world open before him ; the rules of the ancients were yet known to few ; the public judgement was unformed ; he had no example of such fame as might force him upon imitation, nor critics of such authority as might restrain his extravagance ; he therefore indulged his natural disposition ; and his disposition, as Rymer has remarked, led him to comedy. In tragedy he often writes, with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity ; but, in his comic scenes, he seems to produce, without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comic ; but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature. In his tragic scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His comedy pleases by the thoughts and the language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct.

29. The force of his comic scenes has suffered little diminution, from the changes made by a century and a half, in manners or in words. As his personages act upon principles arising from genuine passion, very little modified by particular forms, their pleasures and vexations are communicable to all times and to all places ; they are natural, and therefore durable. The adventitious peculiarities of personal habits are only superficial dyes, bright and pleasing for a little while, yet soon fading to a dim tinct, without any remains of former lustre ; but the discriminations of true passion are the colours

of nature; they pervade the whole mass and can only perish with the body that exhibits them. The accidental compositions of heterogeneous modes are dissolved by the chance which combined them; but the uniform simplicity of primitive qualities neither admits increase nor suffers decay. The sand heaped by one flood is scattered by another, but the rock always continues in its place. The stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabrics of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare.

30. If there be, what I believe there is, in every nation a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language as to remain settled and unaltered; this style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned depart from established forms of speech in hope of finding or making better: those who wish for distinction forsake the vulgar, when the vulgar is right; but there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement, where propriety resides, and where this poet seems to have gathered his comic dialogue. He is therefore more agreeable to the ears of the present age than any other author equally remote and among his other excellencies deserves to be studied as one of the original masters of our language.

31. These observations are to be considered not as unexceptionably constant, but as containing general and predominant truth. Shakespeare's familiar dialogue is affirmed to be smooth and clear, yet not wholly without ruggedness or difficulty; as a country may be eminently fruitful, though it has spots unfit for cultivation; his characters are praised as natural, though their sentiments are sometimes forced and their actions improbable; as the earth upon the whole is spherical, though its surface is varied with protuberances and cavities.

32. Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit. I shall show them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth.

33. His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries

his persons indifferently through right and wrong and at the close dismisses them without further care and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place.

34. The plots are often so loosely formed that a very slight consideration may improve them, and so carelessly pursued that he seems not always fully to comprehend his own design. He omits opportunities of instructing or delighting which the train of his story seems to force upon him, and apparently rejects those exhibitions which would be more affecting, for the sake of those which are more easy.

35. It may be observed that in many of his plays the latter part is evidently neglected. When he found himself near the end of his work, and in view of his reward, he shortened the labour to snatch the profit. He therefore remits his efforts where he should most vigorously exert them, and his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented.

36. He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood but of possibility. These faults Pope has endeavoured, with more zeal than judgement, to transfer to his imagined interpolators. We need not wonder to find Hector quoting Aristotle, when we see the loves of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies. Shakespeare, indeed, was not the only violator of chronology, for in the same age Sidney, who wanted not the advantages of learning, has in his *Arcadia*, confounded the pastoral with the feudal times, the days of innocence, quiet, and security, with those of turbulence, violence, and adventure.

37. In his comic scenes he is seldom very successful when he engages his characters in reciprocations of smartness and contests of sarcasm; their jests are commonly gross, and their pleasantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy nor are sufficiently distinguished from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners. Whether he represented the real conversation of his time is not easy to determine. The reign of Elizabeth is commonly supposed to have been a time of stateliness, formality, and reserve; yet perhaps the relaxations of that severity were not very elegant. There must, however, have been always some modes of gaiety preferable to others, and a writer ought to choose the best.

38. In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity.

39. In narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution and tells the incident imperfectly in many words which might have been more plainly delivered in few. Narration in dramatic poetry is naturally tedious, as it is unanimated and inactive and obstructs the progress of the action; it should therefore always be rapid and enlivened by frequent interruption. Shakespeare found it an incumbrance and, instead of lightening it by brevity, endeavoured to recommend it by dignity and splendour.

40. His declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature; when he endeavoured, like other tragic writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and, instead of inquiring what the occasion demanded, to show how much his stores of knowledge could supply, he seldom escapes without the pity or resentment of his reader.

41. It is incident to him to be now and then entangled with an unwieldy sentiment, which he cannot well express and will not reject; he struggles with it a while, and, if it continues stubborn, comprises it in words such as occur and leaves it to be disentangled and evolved by those who have more leisure to bestow upon it.

42. Not that always where the language is intricate the thought is subtle, or the image always great where the line is bulky; the equality of words to things is very often neglected, and trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas disappoint the attention to which they are recommended by sonorous epithets and swelling figures.

43. But the admirers of this great poet have most reason to complain when he approaches nearest to his highest excellence and seems fully resolved to sink them in dejection and mollify them with tender emotions by the fall of greatness, the danger of innocence, or the crosses of love. What he does best, he soon ceases to do. He is not long soft and pathetic without some idle conceit or contemptible equivocation. He no sooner begins to move than he counteracts himself; and terror and pity, as they are rising in the mind, are checked and blasted by sudden frigidity.

44. A quibble is to Shakespeare what luminous vapours are to the traveller: he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents or enchaining it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble

was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it.

45. It will be thought strange that in enumerating the defects of this writer I have not yet mentioned his neglect of the unities, his violation of those laws which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and of critics.

46. For his other deviations from the art of writing, I resign him to critical justice, without making any other demand in his favour than that which must be indulged to all human excellence: that his virtues be rated with his failings. But from the censure which this irregularity may bring upon him, I shall, with due reverence to that learning which I must oppose, adventure to try how I can defend him.

47. His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect than the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural, and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought.

48. In his other works he has well enough preserved the unity of action. He has not, indeed, an intrigue regularly perplexed and regularly unravelled; he does not endeavour to hide his design only to discover it, for this is seldom the order of real events, and Shakespeare is the poet of nature; but his plan has commonly, what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the conclusion follows by easy consequence. There are perhaps some incidents that might be spared, as in other poets there is much talk that only fills up time upon the stage; but the general system makes gradual advances, and the end of the play is the end of expectation.

49. To the unities of time and place he has shown no regard; and perhaps a nearer view of the principles on which they stand will diminish their value and withdraw from them the veneration which, from the time of Corneille, they have very generally received, by discovering that they have given more trouble to the poet than pleasure to the auditor.

50. The necessity of observing the unities of time and place arises from the supposed necessity of making the drama credible. The critics hold it impossible that an action of months or years can be possibly believed to pass in three hours; or that the spectator can suppose himself to sit in the theatre while ambassadors go and return between distant kings, while armies are levied and towns besieged, while an exile wanders and returns, or till he whom they saw courting his mistress shall lament the untimely fall of his son. The mind revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of reality.

51. From the narrow limitation of time necessarily arises the contraction of place. The spectator, who knows that he saw the first act at Alexandria, cannot suppose that he sees the next at Rome, at a distance to which not the dragons of Medea could, in so short a time, have transported him ; he knows with certainty that he has not changed his place ; and he knows that place cannot change itself ; that what was a house cannot become a plain ; that what was Thebes can never be Persepolis.

52. Such is the triumphant language with which a critic exults over the misery of an irregular poet and exults commonly without resistance or reply. It is time, therefore, to tell him by the authority of Shakespeare, that he assumes, as an unquestionable principle, a position which, while his breath is forming it into words, his understanding pronounces to be false. It is false, that any representation is mistaken for reality ; that any dramatic fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited.

53. The objection arising from the impossibility of passing the first hour at Alexandria and the next at Rome, supposes that when the play opens the spectator really imagines himself at Alexandria and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to Egypt, and that he lives in the days of Antony and Cleopatra. Surely he that imagines this may imagine more. He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation ; if the spectator can be once persuaded that his old acquaintance are Alexander and Caesar, that a room illuminated with candles is the plain of Pharsalia or the bank of Granicus, he is in a state of elevation above the reach of reason or of truth, and from the heights of empyrean poetry may despise the circumscriptions of terrestrial nature. There is no reason why a mind thus wandering in ecstasy should count the clock, or why an hour should not be a century in that calenture of the brains that can make the stage a field.

54. The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. They come to hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation. The lines relate to some action, and an action must be in some place ; but the different actions that complete a story may be in places very remote from each other ; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens and then Sicily which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre.

55. By supposition, as place is introduced, time may b extended; the time required by the fable elapses for the most part between the acts; for, of so much of the action as is represented, the real and poetical duration is the same. If in the first act preparations for war against Mithridates are represented to be made in Rome, the event of the war may, without absurdity, be represented in the catastrophe as happening in Pontus; we know that there is neither war nor preparation for war; we know that we are neither in Rome nor Pontus; that neither Mithridates nor Lucullus are before us. The drama exhibits successive imitations of successive actions; and why may not the second imitation represent an action that happened years after the first, if it be so connected with it that nothing but time can be supposed to intervene? Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination; a lapse of years is as easily conceived as a passage of hours. In contemplation we easily contract the time of real actions and therefore willingly permit it to be contracted when we only see their imitation.

56. It will be asked how the drama moves if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama. It is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original; as representing to the auditor what he would himself feel if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done. The reflection that strikes the heart is not that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed. If there be any fallacy, it is not that we fancy the players, but that we fancy ourselves unhappy for a moment; but we rather lament the possibility than suppose the presence of misery, as a mother weeps over her babe when she remembers that death may take it from her. The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treason real, they would please no more.

57. Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind. When the imagination is recreated by a painted landscape, the trees are not supposed capable to give us shade, or the fountains coolness; but we consider how we should be pleased with such fountains playing beside us and such woods waving over us. We are agitated in reading the history of *Henry the Fifth*, yet no man takes his book for the field of Agincourt. A dramatic exhibition is a book recited with concomitants that increase or diminish its effect. Familiar comedy is often more powerful on the theatre than in the page; imperial tragedy is always less. The humour of Petruchio may be heightened by grimace; but what voice or what gesture can hope to add dignity or force to the soliloquy of Cato?

58. A play read affects the mind like a play acted. It is herefore evident that the action is not supposed to be real; and it

follows that between the acts a longer or shorter time may be allowed to pass, and that no more account of space or duration is to be taken by the auditor of a drama than by the reader of a narrative, before whom may pass in an hour the life of a hero or the revolutions of an empire.

59. Whether Shakespeare knew the unities and rejected them by design, or deviated from them by happy ignorance, it is, I think, impossible to decide and useless to inquire. We may reasonably suppose that, when he rose to notice, he did not want the counsels and admonitions of scholars and critics, and that he at last deliberately persisted in a practice, which he might have begun by chance. As nothing is essential to the fable but unity of action, and as the unities of time and place arise evidently from false assumptions, and, by circumscribing the extent of the drama, lessen its variety, I cannot think it much to be lamented that they were not known by him, or not observed ; nor, if such another poet could arise, should I very vehemently reproach him that his first act passed at Venice and his next in Cyprus. Such violations of rules merely positive become the comprehensive genius of Shakespeare, and such censures are suitable to the minute and slender criticism of Voltaire :

> Non usque adeo permiscuit imis
> Longus summa dies, ut non, si voce Metelli
> Serventur leges, malint a Caesare tolli.

60. Yet when I speak thus slightly of dramatic rules, I cannot but recollect how much wit and learning may be produced against me ; before such authorities I am afraid to stand, not that I think the present question one of those that are to be decided by mere authority, but because it is to be suspected that these precepts have not been so easily received but for better reasons than I have yet been able to find. The result of my inquiries, in which it would be ludicrous to boast of impartiality, is that the unities of time and place are not essential to a just drama ; that, though they may sometimes conduce to pleasure, they are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction ; and that a play written with nice observation of critical rules is to be contemplated as an elaborate curiosity, as the product of superfluous and ostentatious art, by which is shown, rather what is possible, than what is necessary.

61. He that, without diminution of any other excellence, shall preserve all the unities unbroken deserves the like applause with the architect who shall display all the orders of architecture in a citadel without any deduction from its strength ; but the principal beauty of a citadel is to exclude the enemy, and the greatest graces of a play are to copy nature and instruct life.

62. Perhaps what I have here not dogmatically but deliberatively written may recall the principles of the drama to a new examina-

tion. I am almost frighted at my own temerity and, when I estimate the fame and the strength of those that maintain the contrary opinion, am ready to sink down in reverential silence ; as Aeneas withdrew from the defence of Troy when he saw Neptune shaking the wall and Juno heading the besiegers.

63. Those whom my arguments cannot persuade to give their approbation to the judgement of Shakespeare will easily, if they consider the condition of his life, make some allowance for his ignorance.

64. Every man's performances, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived and with his own particular opportunities ; and though to the reader a book be not worse or better for the circumstances of the author, yet as there is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities, and as the inquiry how far man may extend his designs, or how high he may rate his native force, is of far greater dignity than in what rank we shall place any particular performance, curiosity is always busy to discover the instruments as well as to survey the workmanship, to know how much is to be ascribed to original powers and how much to casual and adventitious help. The palaces of Peru or Mexico were certainly mean and incommodious habitations if compared to the houses of European monarchs yet who could forbear to view them with astonishment who remembered that they were built without the use of iron ?

65. The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. The philology of Italy had been transplanted hither in the regin of Henry the Eighth ; and the learned languages had been successfully cultivated by Lily, Linacre, and More ; by Pole, Cheke, and Gardiner ; and afterwards by Smith, Clerk, Haddon, and Ascham. Greek was now taught to boys in the principal schools ; and those who united elegance with learning read with great diligence the Italian and Spanish poets. But literature was yet confined to professed scholars, or to men and women of high rank. The public was gross and dark ; and to be able to read and write was an accomplishment still valued for its rarity.

66. Nations, like individuals, have their infancy. A people newly awakened to literary curiosity, being yet unacquainted with the true state of things, knows not how to judge of that which is proposed as its resemblance. Whatever is remote from common appearances is always welcome to vulgar, as to childish, credulity ; and of a country unenlightened by learning, the whole people is the vulgar. The study of those who then aspired to plebeian learning was laid out upon adventures, giants, dragons, and enchantments. *The Death of Arthur* was the favourite volume.

67. The mind which has feasted on the luxurious wonders of fiction has no taste of the insipidity of truth. A play which imitated

only the common occurrences of the world would, upon the admirers of *Palmerin* and *Guy of Warwick*, have made little impression ; he that wrote for such an audience was under the necessity of looking round for strange events and fabulous transactions ; and that incredibility by which maturer knowledge is offended was the chief recommendation of writings to unskilful curiosity.

68. Our author's plots are generally borrowed from novels ; and it is reasonable to suppose that he chose the most popular, such as were read by many and related by more ; for his audience could not have followed him through the intricacies of the drama, had they not held the thread of the story in their hands.

69. The stories which we now find only in remoter authors were in his time accessible and familiar The fable of *As You Like It*, which is supposed to be copied from Chaucer's *Gamelyn*, was a tittle pamphlet of those times ; and old Mr Cibber remembered the tale of *Hamlet* in plain English prose, which the critics have now lo seek in Saxo Grammaticus.

70. His English histories he took from English chronicles and English ballads ; and as the ancient writers were made known to his countrymen by versions, they supplied him with new subjects ; he dilated some of Plutarch's lives into plays, when they had been translated by North.

71. His plots, whether historical or fabulous, are always crowded with incidents, by which the attention of a rude people was more easily caught than by sentiment or argumentation ; and such is the power of the marvellous, even over those who despise it, that every man finds his mind more strongly seized by the tragedies of Shakespeare than of any other writer. Others please us by particular speeches ; but he always makes us anxious for the event and has perhaps excelled all but Homer in securing the first purpose of a writer, by exciting restless and unquenchable curiosity and compelling him that reads his work to read it through.

72. The shows and bustle with which his plays abound have the same original. As knowledge advances, pleasure passes from the eye to the ear, but returns, as it declines, from the ear to the eye. Those to whom our author's labours were exhibited had more skill in pomps or processions than in poetical language and perhaps wanted some visible and discriminated events as comments on the dialogue. He knew how he should most please ; and whether his practice is more agreeable to nature, or whether his example has prejudiced the nation, we still find that on our stage something must be done as well as said, and inactive declamation is very coldly heard, however musical or elegant, passionate or sublime.

73. Voltaire expresses his wonder that our author's extravagances are endured by a nation which has seen the tragedy of *Cato*.

Let him be answered that Addison speaks the language of poets; and Shakespeare, of men. We find in *Cato* innumerable beauties which enamour us of its author, but we see nothing that acquaints us with human sentiments or human actions ; we place it with the fairest and the noblest progeny which judgement propagates by conjunction with learning ; but *Othello* is the vigorous and vivacious offspring of observation impregnated by genius. *Cato* affords a splendid exhibition of artificial and fictitious manners and delivers just and noble sentiments, in diction easy, elevated, and harmonious, but its hopes and fears communicate no vibration to the heart ; the composition refers us only to the writer ; we pronounce the name of *Cato*, but we think on Addison.

74. The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades, and scented with flowers ; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses ; filling the eye with awful pomp and gratifying the mind with endless diversity. Other poets display cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finished, wrought into shape, and polished unto brightness. Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in unexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals.

75. It has been much disputed whether Shakespeare owed his excellence to his own native force, or whether he had the common helps of scholastic education, the precepts of critical science, and the examples of ancient authors.

76. There has always prevailed a tradition that Shakespeare wanted learning, that he had no regular education, nor much skill in the dead languages. Jonson, his friend, affirms that *he had small Latin, and less Greek* ; who, besides that he had no imaginable temptation to falsehood, wrote at a time when the character and acquisitions of Shakespeare were known to multitudes. His evidence ought therefore to decide the controversy, unless some testimony of equal force could be opposed

77. Some have imagined that they have discovered deep learning in many imitations of old writers ; but the examples which I have known urged were drawn from books translated in his time ; or were such easy coincidences of thought as will happen to all who consider the same subjects ; or such remarks on life or axioms of morality as float in conversation and are transmitted through the world in proverbial sentences.

78. I have found it remarked that in this important sentence, *Go before, I'll follow*, we read a translation of, *I prae, sequar*. I have been told that when Caliban, after a pleasing dream, says, *I cried*

to sleep again, the author imitates Anacreon, who had, like every other man, the same wish on the same occasion.

79. There are a few passages which may pass for imitations, but so few that the exception only confirms the rule ; he obtained them from accidental quotations or by oral communication and, as he used what he had, would have used more if he had obtained it.

80. The *Comedy of Errors* is confessedly taken from the *Menaechmi* of Plautus ; from the only play of Plautus which was then in English. What can be more probable than that he who copied that would have copied more ; but that those which were not translated were inaccessible ?

81. Whether he knew the modern languages is uncertain. That his plays have some French scenes proves but little ; he might easily procure them to be written, and probably, even though he had known the language in the common degree, he could not have written it without assistance. In the story of *Romeo and Juliet* he is observed to have followed the English translation, where it deviates from the Italian ; but this on the other part proves nothing against his knowledge of the original. He was to copy, not what he knew himself, but what was known to his audience.

82. It is most likely that he had learned Latin sufficiently to make him acquainted with construction, but that he never advanced to an easy perusal of the Roman authors. Concerning his skill in modern languages, I can find no sufficient ground of determination ; but as no imitations of French or Italian authors have been discovered, though the Italian poetry was then high in esteem, I am inclined to believe that he read little more than English and chose for his fables only such tales as he found translated.

83. That much knowledge is scattered over his works is very justly observed by Pope ; but it is often such knowledge as books did not supply. He that will understand Shakespeare must not be content to study him in the closet, he must look for his meaning sometimes among the sports of the field and sometimes among the manufactures of the shop.

84. There is, however, proof enough that he was a very diligent reader, nor was our language then so indigent of books but that he might very liberally indulge his curiosity without excursion into foreign literature. Many of the Roman authors were translated, and some of the Greek ; the Reformation had filled the kingdom with theological learning ; most of the topics of human disquisition had found English writers ; and poetry had been cultivated not only with diligence but success. This was a stock of knowledge sufficient for a mind so capable of appropriating and improving it.

85. But the greater part of his excellence was the product of his own genius. He found the English stage in a state of the utmost

rudeness ; no essays either in tragedy or comedy had appeared from which it could be discovered to what degree of delight either one or other might be carried. Neither character nor dialogue were yet understood. Shakespeare may be truly said to have introduced them both amongst us and in some of his happier scenes to have carried them both to the utmost height.

86. By what gradations of improvement he proceeded is not easily known ; for the chronology of his works is yet unsettled. Rowe is of opinion that 'perhaps we are not to look for his beginning, like those of other writers, in his least perfect works ; art had so little and nature so large a share in what he did, that for aught I know,' says he, 'the performances of his youth, as they were the most vigorous, were the best.' But the power of nature is only the power of using to any certain purpose the materials which diligence procures or opportunity supplies. Nature gives no man knowledge, and, when images are collected by study and experience, can only assist in combining or applying them. Shakespeare, however favoured by nature, could impart only what he had learned ; and as he must increase his ideas, like other mortals, by gradual acquisition, he, like them, grew wiser as he grew older, could display life better, as he knew it more, and instruct with more efficacy, as he was himself more amply instructed.

87. There is a vigilance of observation and accuracy of distinction which books and precepts cannot confer ; from this almost all original and native excellence proceeds. Shakespeare must have looked upon mankind with perspicacity, in the highest degree curious and attentive. Other writers borrow their characters from preceding writers and diversify them only by the accidental appendages of present manners ; the dress is a little varied, but the body is the same. Our author had both matter and form to provide ; for, except the characters of Chaucer, to whom I think he is not much indebted, there were no writers in English, and perhaps not many in other modern languages, which showed life in its native colours.

88. The contest about the original benevolence or malignity of man had not yet commenced. Speculation had not yet attempted to analyse the mind, to trace the passions to their sources, to unfold the seminal principles of vice and virtue, or sound the depths of the heart for the motives of action. All those inquiries, which from that time that human nature became the fashionable study have been made sometimes with nice discernment but often with idle subtilty, were yet unattempted. The tales with which the infancy of learning was satisfied exhibited only the superficial appearances of action, related the events but omitted the causes, and were formed for such as delighted in wonders rather than in truth. Mankind was not then to be studied in the closet ; he that would know the world was under the necessity of gleaning his own remarks by mingling as he could in its business and amusements.

89. Boyle congratulated himself upon his high birth, because it favoured his curiosity by facilitating his access. Shakespeare had no such advantage; he came to London a needy adventurer and lived for a time by very mean employments. Many works of genius and learning have been performed in states of life that appear very little favourable to thought or to inquiry; so many that he who considers them is inclined to think that he sees enterprise and perseverance predominating over all external agency and bidding help and hindrance vanish before them. The genius of Shakespeare was not to be depressed by the weight of poverty nor limited by the narrow conversation to which men in want are inevitably condemned; the incumbrances of his fortune were shaken from his mind, *as dew-drops from a lion's mane.*

90. Though he had so many difficulties to encounter and so little assistance to surmount them, he has been able to obtain an exact knowledge of many modes of life and many casts of native dispositions, to vary them with great multiplicity, to mark them by nice distinctions, and to show them in full view by proper combinations. In this part of his performances he had none to imitate, but has himself been imitated by all succeeding writers; and it may be doubted whether from all his successors more maxims of theoretical knowledge or more rules of practical prudence can be collected than he alone has given to his country.

91. Nor was his attention confined to the actions of men; he was an exact surveyor of the inanimate world; his descriptions have always some peculiarities gathered by contemplating things as they really exist. It may be observed that the oldest poets of many nations preserve their reputation, and that the following generations of wit, after a short celebrity, sink into oblivion. The first, whoever they be, must take their sentiments and descriptions immediately from knowledge; the resemblance is therefore just, their descriptions are verified by every eye, and their sentiments acknowledged by every breast. Those whom their fame invites to the same studies copy partly them and partly nature, till the books of one age gain such authority as to stand in the place of nature to another, and imitation, always deviating a little, becomes at last capricious and casual. Shakespeare, whether life or nature be his subject, shows plainly that he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of any other mind; the ignorant feel his representations to be just, and the learned see that they are complete.

92. Perhaps it would not be easy to find any author, except Homer, who invented so much as Shakespeare, who so much advanced the studies which he cultivated or effused so much novelty upon his age or country. The form, the characters, the language, and the shows of the English drama are his 'He seems,' says Dennis, 'to have been the very original of our English tragical harmony, that is,

the harmony of blank verse, diversified often by dissyllable and trisyllable terminations. For the diversity distinguishes it from heroic harmony, and by bringing it nearer to common use makes it more proper to gain attention and more fit for action and dialogue. Such verse we make when we are writing prose; we make such verse in common conversation.'

93. I know not whether this praise is rigorously just. This dissyllable termination, which the critic rightly appropriates to the drama, is to be found—though, I think, not in *Gorboduc*, which is confessedly before our author—yet in *Hieronimo*, of which the date is not certain, but which there is reason to believe at least as old as his earliest plays. This, however, is certain, that he is the first who taught either tragedy or comedy to please, there being no theatrical piece of any older writer of which the name is known except to antiquaries and collectors of books which are sought because they are scarce, and would not have been scarce, had they been much esteemed.

94. To him we must ascribe the praise, unless Spenser may divide it with him, of having first discovered to how much smoothness and harmony the English language could be softened. He has speeches, perhaps sometimes scenes, which have all the delicacy of Rowe, without his effeminacy. He endeavours indeed commonly to strike by the force and vigour of his dialogue, but he never executes his purpose better than when he tries to soothe by softness.

95. Yet it must be at last confessed that as we owe everything to him, he owes something to us; that, if much of his praise is paid by perception and judgement, much is likewise given by custom and veneration. We fix our eyes upon his graces and turn them from his deformities and endure in him what we should in another loathe or despise. If we endured without praising, respect for the father of our drama might excuse us; but I have seen in the book of some modern critic a collection of anomalies, which show that he has corrupted language by every mode of depravation, but which his admirer has accumulated as a monument of honour.

96. He has scenes of undoubted and perpetual excellence; but perhaps not one play which, if it were now exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to the conclusion. I am indeed far from thinking that his works were wrought to his own ideas of perfection; when they were such as would satisfy the audience, they satisfied the writer. It is seldom that authors, though more studious of fame than Shakespeare, rise much above the standard of their own age; to add a little to what is best will always be sufficient for present praise, and those who find themselves exalted into fame are willing to credit their encomiasts and to spare the labour of contending with themselves.

97. It does not appear that Shakespeare thought his works worthy of posterity, that he levied any ideal tribute upon future times, or had any further prospect than of present popularity and present profit. When his plays had been acted, his hope was at an end; he solicited no addition of honour from the reader. He therefore made no scruple to repeat the same jests in many dialogues, or to entangle different plots by the same knot of perplexity, which may be at least forgiven him by those who recollect that of Congreve's four comedies two are concluded by a marriage in a mask, by a deception which perhaps never happened, and which, whether likely or not, he did not invent.

98. So careless was this great poet of future fame that, though he retired to ease and plenty while he was yet little *declined into the vale of years*, before he could be disgusted with fatigue or disabled by infirmity, he made no collection of his works nor desired to rescue those that had been already published from the depravations that obscured them or secure to the rest a better destiny, by giving them to the world in their genuine state.

99. Of the plays which bear the name of Shakespeare in the late editions, the greater part were not published till about seven years after his death; and the few which appeared in his life are apparently thrust into the world without the care of the author and therefore probably without his knowledge.

100. Of all the publishers, clandestine or professed, the negligence and unskilfulness has by the late revisers been sufficiently shown. The faults of all are indeed numerous and gross and have not only corrupted many passages perhaps beyond recovery but have brought others into suspicion which are only obscured by obsolete phraseology or by the writer's unskilfulness and affectation. To alter is more easy than to explain, and temerity is a more common quality than diligence. Those who saw that they must employ conjecture to a certain degree were willing to indulge it a little further. Had the author published his own works, we should have sat quietly down to disentangle his intricacies and clear his obscurities; but now we tear what we cannot loose and eject what we happen not to understand.

101. The faults are more than could have happened without the concurence of many causes. The style of Shakespeare was in itself ungrammatical, perplexed, and obscure; his works were transcribed for the players by those who may be supposed to have seldom understood them; they were transmitted by copiers equally unskilful, who still multiplied errors; they were perhaps sometimes mutilated by the actors, for the sake of shortening the speeches, and were at last printed without correction of the press.

102 In this state they remained, not as Dr. Warburton supposes, because they were unregarded, but because the editor's art

was not yet applied to modern languages, and our ancestors were accustomed to so much negligence of English printers that they could very patiently endure it. At last an edition was undertaken by Rowe; not because a poet was to be published by a poet, for Rowe seems to have thought very little on correction or explanation; but that our author's works might appear like those of his fraternity, with the appendages of a life and recommendatory preface. Rowe has been clamorously blamed for not performing what he did not undertake; and it is time that justice be done him, by confessing that though he seems to have had no thought of corruption beyond the printer's errors, yet he has made many emendations if they were not made before, which his successors have received without acknowledgement, and which, if they had produced them, would have filled pages and pages with censures of the stupidity by which the faults were committed, with displays of the absurdities which they involved, with ostentatious expositions of the new reading, and self-congratulations on the happiness of discovering it.

103. As of the other editors I have preserved the prefaces, I have likewise borrowed the author's life from Rowe, though not written with much elegance or spirit; it relates, however, what is now to be known, and therefore deserves to pass through all succeeding publications.

104. The nation had been for many years content enough with Mr. Rowe's performance, when Mr Pope made them acquainted with the true state of Shakespeare's text, showed that it was extremely corrupt, and gave reason to hope that there were means of reforming it. He collated the old copies, which none had thought to examine before, and restored many lines to their integrity; but, by a very compendious criticism, he rejected whatever he disliked and thought more of amputation than of cure.

105. I know not why he is commended by Dr Warburton for distinguishing the genuine from the spurious plays. In this choice he exerted no judgement of his own; the plays which he received were given by Heming and Condell, the first editors: and those which he rejected, though, according to the licentiousness of the press in those times, they were printed during Shakespeare's life, with his name, had been omitted by his friends and were never added to his works before the edition of 1664 from which they were copied by the later printers.

106. This was a work which Pope seems to have thought unworthy of his abilities, being not able to suppress his contempt of *the dull duty of an editor*. He understood but half his undertaking. The duty of a collator is indeed dull, yet, like other tedious tasks, is very necessary; but an emendatory critic would ill discharge his duty without qualities very different from dullness. In perusing a corrupted piece, he must have before him all possibilities of mean-

ing, with all possibilities of expression. Such must be his comprehension of thought and such his copiousness of language. Out of many readings possible, he must be able to select that which best suits with the state, opinions, and modes of language prevailing in every age and with his author's particular cast of thought and turn of expression. Such must be his knowledge and such his taste. Conjectural criticism demands more than humanity possesses, and he that exercises it with most praise has very frequent need of indulgence. Let us now be told no more of the dull duty of an editor.

107. Confidence is the common consequence of success. They whose excellence of any kind has been loudly celebrated are ready to conclude that their powers are universal. Pope's edition fell below his own expectations, and he was so much offended when he was found to have left anything for others to do that he passed the latter part of his life in a state of hostility with verbal criticism.

108. I have retained all his notes, that no fragment of so great a writer may be lost. His Preface, valuable alike for elegance of composition and justness of remark, and containing a general criticism on his author so extensive that little can be added and so exact that little can be disputed, every editor has an interest to suppress, but that every reader would demand its insertion.

109. Pope was succeeded by Theobald, a man of narrow comprehension and small acquisitions, with no native and intrinsic splendour of genius, with little of the artificial light of learning, but zealous for minute accuracy and not negligent in pursuing it. He collated the ancient copies and rectified many errors. A man so anxiously scrupulous might have been expected to do more, but what little he did was commonly right.

110. In his reports of copies and editions he is not to be trusted without examination. He speaks sometimes indefinitely of copies, when he has only one. In his enumeration of editions, he mentions the two first Folios as of high, and the third Folio as of middle authority: but the truth is that the first is equivalent to all others, and that the rest only deviate from it by the printer's negligence. Whoever has any of the folios has all, excepting those diversities which mere reiteration of editions will produce. I collated them all at the beginning, but afterwards used only the first.

111. Of his notes I have generally retained those which he retained himself in his second edition, except when they were confuted by subsequent annotators or were too minute to merit preservation. I have sometimes adopted his restoration of a comma, without inserting the panegyric in which he celebrated himself for his achievement. The exuberant excrescence of his diction I have often lopped, his triumphant exultations over Pope and Rowe I have sometimes suppressed, and his contemptible ostentation I have

frequently concealed; but I have in some places shown him, as he would have shown himself, for the reader's diversion, that the inflated emptiness of some notes may justify or excuse the contraction of the rest.

112. Theobald, thus weak and ignorant, thus mean and faithless, thus petulant and ostentatious, by the good luck of having Pope for his enemy, has escaped, and escaped alone, with reputation, from this undertaking. So willingly does the world support those who solicit favour, against those who command reverence; and so easily is he praised whom no man can envy.

113. Our author fell then into the hands of Sir Thomas Hanmer, the Oxford editor, a man, in my opinion, eminently qualified by nature for such studies. He had, what is the first requisite to emendatory criticism, that intuition by which the poet's intention is immediately discovered, and that dexterity of intellect which dispatches its work by the easiest means. He had undoubtedly read much; his acquaintance with customs, opinions, and traditions, seems to have been large; and he is often learned without show. He seldom passes what he does not understand, without an attempt to find or to make a meaning, and sometimes hastily makes what a little more attention would have found. He is solicitous to reduce to grammar what he could not be sure that his author intended to be grammatical. Shakespeare regarded more the series of ideas than of words; and his language, not being designed for the reader's desk, was all that he desired it to be if it conveyed his meaning to the audience.

114. Hanmer's care of the metre has been too violently censured. He found the measures reformed in so many passages by the silent labours of some editors, with the silent acquiescence of the rest, that he thought himself allowed to extend a little further the licence which had already been carried so far without reprehension; and of his corrections in general, it must be confessed that they are often just, and made commonly with the least possible violation of the text.

115 But by inserting his emendations, whether invented or borrowed, into the page without any notice of varying copies, he has appropriated the labour of his predecessors and made his own edition of little authority. His confidence indeed, both in himself and others, was too great; he supposes all to be right that was done by Pope and Theobald; he seems not to suspect a critic of fallibility; and it was but reasonable that he should claim what he so liberally granted.

116. As he never writes without careful inquiry and diligent consideration, I have received all his notes and believe that every reader will wish for more.

117. Of the last editor it is more difficult to speak. Respect is due to high place, tenderness to living reputation, and veneration to genius and learning: but he cannot be justly offended at that liberty of which he has himself so frequently given an example, nor very solicitous what is thought of notes which he ought never to have considered as part of his serious employments, and which, I suppose, since the ardour of composition is remitted, he no longer numbers among his happy effusions.

118. The original and predominant error of his commentary is acquiescence in his first thoughts; that precipitation which is produced by consciousness of quick discernment; and that confidence which presumes to do, by surveying the surface, what labour only can perform, by penetrating the bottom. His notes exhibit sometimes perverse interpretations and sometimes improbable conjectures; he at one time gives the author more profundity of meaning than the sentence admits and at another discovers absurdities where the sense is plain to every other reader. But his emendations are likewise often happy and just and his interpretation of obscure passages learned and sagacious.

119. Of his notes, I have commonly rejected those against which the general voice of the public has exclaimed, or which their own incongruity immediately condemns, and which, I suppose, the author himself would desire to be forgotten. Of the rest, to part I have given the highest approbation, by inserting the offered reading in the text; part I have left to the judgement of the reader, as doubtful, though specious; and part I have censured without reserve, but I am sure without bitterness of malice, and, I hope, without wantonness of insult.

120. It is no pleasure to me, in revising my volumes, to observe how much paper is wasted in confutation. Whoever considers the revolutions of learning and the various questions of greater or less importance upon which wit and reason have exercised their powers, must lament the unsuccessfulness of inquiry and the slow advances of truth, when he reflects that great part of the labour of every writer is only the destruction of those that went before him. The first care of the builder of a new system is to demolish the fabrics which are standing. The chief desire of him that comments an author is to show how much other commentators have corrupted and obscured him. The opinions prevalent in one age as truths above the reach of controversy are confuted and rejected in another and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progress. Thus sometimes truth and error, and sometimes contrarieties of error, take each other's place by reciprocal invasion. The tide of seeming knowledge which is poured over one generation retires and leaves another naked and barren; the sudden meteors of intelligence which for a while appear to shoot their beams into the regions of obscurity, on a sudden withdraw their lustre and leave mortals again to grope their way.

121. These elevations and depressions of renown and the contradictions to which all improvers of knowledge must for ever be exposed, since they are not escaped by the highest and brightest of mankind, may surely be endured with patience by critics and annotators, who can rank themselves but as the satellites of their authors. How canst thou beg for life, says Achilles to his captive, when thou knowest that thou art now to suffer only what must another day be suffered by Achilles ?

122. Dr. Warburton had a name sufficient to confer celebrity on those who could exalt themselves into antagonists, and his notes have raised a clamour too loud to be distinct. His chief assailants are the authors of *The Canons of Criticism* and of the *Revisal of Shakespeare's Text* ; of whom one ridicules his errors with airy petulance, suitable enough to the levity of the controversy : the other attacks them with gloomy malignity, as if he were dragging to justice an assassin or incendiary. The one stings like a fly, sucks a little blood, take a gay flutter, and returns for more ; the other bites like a viper and would be glad to leave inflammations and gangrene behind him. When I think on one, with his confederates, I remember the danger of Coriolanus, who was afraid that *girls with spits, and boys with stones, should slay him in puny battle* ; when the other crosses my imagination, I remember the prodigy in *Macbeth* :

> A falcon towering in his pride of place,
> Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

123. Let me, however, do them justice. One is a wit, and one a scholar. They have both shown acuteness sufficient in the discovery of faults and have both advanced some probable interpretations of obscure passages ; but when they aspire to conjecture and emendation, it appears how falsely we all estimate our own abilities, and the little which they have been able to perform might have taught them more candour to the endeavours of others.

124. Before Dr. Warburton's edition, *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* had been published by Mr. Upton, a man skilled in languages and acquainted with books, but who seems to have had no great vigour of genius or nicety of taste. Many of his explanations are curious and useful, but he, likewise, though he professed to oppose the licentious confidence of editors and adhere to the old copies, is unable to restrain the rage of emendation, though his ardour is ill seconded by his skill. Every cold empiric, when his heart is expanded by a successful experiment, swells into a theorist, and the laborious collator at some unlucky moment frolics in conjecture.

125. *Critical, Historical, and Explanatory Notes* have been likewise published upon Shakespeare by Dr. Grey, whose diligent persual of the old English writers has enabled him to make some useful observations. What he undertook he has well enough performed, but as he neither attempts judicial nor emendatory

criticism, he employs rather his memory than his sagacity. It were to be wished that all would endeavour to imitate his modesty who have not been able to surpass his knowledge.

126. I can say with great sincerity of all my predecessors, what I hope will hereafter be said of me, that not one has left Shakespeare without improvement; nor is there one to whom I have not been indebted for assistance and information. Whatever I have taken from them, it was my intention to refer to its original author, and it is certain that what I have not given to another, I believed when I wrote it to be my own. In some perhaps I have been anticipated; but if I am ever found to encroach upon the remarks of any other commentator, I am willing that the honour, be it more or less, should be transferred to the first claimant, for his right, and his alone, stands above dispute; the second can prove his pretensions only to himself, nor can himself always distinguish invention, with sufficient certainty, from recollection.

127. They have all been treated by me with candour, which they have not been careful of observing to one another. It is not easy to discover from what cause the acrimony of a scholiast can naturally proceed. The subjects to be discussed by him are of very small importance; they involve neither property nor liberty, nor favour the interest of sect or party. The various readings of copies and different interpretations of a passage seem to be questions that might exercise the wit without engaging the passions. But whether it be that *small things make mean men proud*, and vanity catches small occasions; or that all contrariety of opinion, even in those that can defend it no longer, makes proud men angry; there is often found in commentaries a spontaneous strain of invective and contempt, more eager and venomous than is vented by the most furious controvertist in politics against those whom he is hired to defame.

128. Perhaps the lightness of the matter may conduce to the vehemence of the agency; when the truth to be investigated is so near to inexistence as to escape attention, its bulk is to be enlarged by rage and exclamation. That to which all would be indifferent in its original state may attract notice when the fate of a name is appended to it. A commentator has indeed great temptations to supply by turbulence what he wants of dignity, to beat his little gold to a spacious surface, to work that to foam which no art or diligence can exalt to spirit.

129. The notes which I have borrowed or written are either illustrative, by which difficulties are explained; or judicial, by which faults and beauties are remarked; or emendatory, by which depravations are corrected.

130. The explanations transcribed from others, if I do not subjoin any other interpretation, I suppose commonly to be right, at least I intended by acquiescence to confess that I have nothing better to propose.

131. After the labours of all the editors, I found many passages which appeared to me likely to obstruct the greater number of readers and thought it my duty to facilitate their passage. It is impossible for an expositor not to write too little for some and too much for others. He can only judge what is necessary by his own experience; and, how long soever he may deliberate, will at last explain many lines which the learned will think impossible to be mistaken and omit many for which the ignorant will want his help. These are censures merely relative and must be quietly endured. I have endeavoured to be neither superfluously copious nor scrupulously reserved, and hope that I have made my author's meaning accessible to many who before were frightened from perusing him, and contributed something to the public, by diffusing innocent and rational pleasure.

132. The complete explanation of an author not systematic and consequential but desultory and vagrant, abounding in casual allusions and light hints, is not to be expected from any single scholiast. All personal reflections, when names are suppressed, must be in a few years irrecoverably obliterated; and customs too minute to attract the notice of law, such as modes of dress, formalities of conversation, rules of visits, disposition of furniture, and practices of ceremony, which naturally find places in family dialogue, are so fugitive and unsubstantial that they are not easily retained or recovered. What can be known will be collected by chance from the recesses of obscure and obsolete papers perused commonly with some other view. Of this knowledge every man has some, and none has much; but when an author has engaged the public attention, those who can add anything to his illustration communicate their discoveries, and time produces what had eluded diligence.

133. To time I have been obliged to resign many passages which, though I did not understand them, will perhaps hereafter be explained; having, I hope, illustrated some which others have neglected or mistaken, sometimes by short remarks or marginal directions, such as every editor has added at his will, and often by comments more laborious than the matter will seem to deserve; but that which is most difficult is not always most important, and to an editor nothing is a trifle by which his author is obscured.

134. The poetical beauties or defects I have not been very diligent to observe. Some plays have more and some fewer judicial observations, not in proportion to their difference of merit, but because I gave this part of my design to chance and to caprice. The reader, I believe, is seldom pleased to find his opinion anticipated; it is natural to delight more in what we find or make than in what we receive. Judgement, like other faculties, is improved by practice, and its advancement is hindered by submission to dictatorial decisions, as the memory grows torpid by the use of a

table-book. Some initiation is, however, necessary. Of all skill, part is infused by precept, and part is obtained by habit; I have therefore shown so much as may enable the candidate of criticism to discover the rest.

135. To the end of most plays I have added short strictures, containing a general censure of faults or praise of excellence; in which I know not how much I have concurred with the current opinion; but I have not, by any affectation of singularity, deviated from it. Nothing is minutely and particularly examined, and therefore it is to be supposed that in the plays which are condemned there is much to be praised, and in those which are praised much to be condemned.

136. The part of criticism in which the whole succession of editors has laboured with the greatest diligence, which has occasioned the most arrogant ostentation and excited the keenest acrimony, is the emendation of corrupted passages, to which the public attention, having been first drawn by the violence of the contention between Pope and Theobald, has been continued by the persecution which, with a kind of conspiracy, has been since raised against all the publishers of Shakespeare.

137. That many passages have passed in a state of depravation through all the editions is indubitably certain; of these the restoration is only to be attempted by collation of copies or sagacity of conjecture. The collator's province is safe and easy, the conjecture's perilous and difficult. Yet as the greater part of the plays are extant only in one copy, the peril must not be avoided nor the difficulty refused.

138. Of the readings which this emulation of amendment has hitherto produced, some from the labours of every publisher I have advanced into the text; those are to be considered as in my opinion sufficiently supported; some I have rejected without mention, as evidently erroneous; some I have left in the notes without censure or approbation, as resting in equipoise between objection and defence; and some, which seemed specious but not right, I have inserted with a subsequent animadversion.

139. Having classed the observations of others, I was at last to try what I could substitute for their mistakes and how I could supply their omissions. I collated such copies as I could procure and wished for more, but have not found the collectors of these rarities very communicative. Of the editions which chance or kindness put into my hands I have given an enumeration, that I may not be blamed for neglecting what I had not the power to do.

140. By examining the old copies, I soon found that the later publishers, with all their boasts of diligence, suffered many passages to stand unauthorized, and contented themselves with Rowe's

regulation of the text even where they knew it to be arbitrary and with a little consideration might have found it to be wrong. Some of these alterations are only the ejection of a word for one that appeared to him more elegant or more intelligible. These corruptions I have often silently rectified; for the history of our language and the true force of our words can only be preserved by keeping the text of authors free from adulteration. Others, and those very frequent, smoothed the cadence or regulated the measure; on these I have not exercised the same rigour; if only a word was transposed or a particle inserted or omitted, I have sometimes suffered the line to stand; for the inconstancy of the copies is such as that some liberties may be easily permitted. But this practice I have not suffered to proceed far, having restored the primitive diction wherever it could for any reason be preferred.

141. The emendations which comparison of copies supplied I have inserted in the text; sometimes, where the improvement was slight, without notice, and sometimes with an account of the reasons of the change.

142. Conjecture, though it be sometimes unavoidable, I have not wantonly nor licentiously indulged. It has been my settled principle that the reading of the ancient books is probably true and therefore is not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity, or mere improvement of the sense. For though much credit is not due to the fidelity, nor any to the judgement, of the first publishers, yet they who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right than we who read it only by imagination. But it is evident that they have often made strange mistakes by ignorance or negligence, and that therefore something may be properly attempted by criticism, keeping the middle way between presumption and timidity.

143. Such criticism I have attempted to practise, and where any passage appeared inextricably perplexed, have endeavoured to discover how it may be recalled to sense with least violence. But my first labour is always to turn the old text on every side and try if there be any interstice through which light can find its way; nor would Huetius himself condemn me as refusing the trouble of research for the ambition of alteration. In this modest industry I have not been unsuccessful. I have rescued many lines from the violations of temerity and secured many scenes from the inroads of correction. I have adopted the Roman sentiment, that it is more honourable to save a citizen than to kill an enemy, and have been more careful to protect than to attack.

144. I have preserved the common distribution of the plays into acts, though I believe it to be in almost all the plays void of authority. Some of those which are divided in the later editions have no division in the first Folio, and some that are divided in the Folio have no division in the preceding copies. The settled mode of the theatre requires four intervals in the play; but few, if any,

of our author's compositions can be properly distributed in that manner. An act is so much of the drama as passes without intervention of time or change of place. A pause makes a new act. In every real, and therefore in every imitative action, the intervals may be more or fewer, the restricton of five acts being accidental and arbitrary. This Shakespeare knew and this he practised; his plays were written and at first printed in one unbroken continuity and ought now to be exhibited with short pauses interposed as often as the scene is changed or any considerable time is required to pass. This method would at once quell a thousand absurdities.

145. In restoring the author's works to their integrity, I have considered the punctuation as wholly in my power; for what could be their care of colons and commas who corrupted words and sentences? Whatever could be done by adjusting points is therefore silently performed, in some plays with much diligence, in others with less; it is hard to keep a busy eye steadily fixed upon evanescent atoms or a discursive mind upon evanescent truth.

146. The same liberty has been taken with a few particles or other words of slight effect. I have sometimes inserted or omitted them without notice. I have done that sometimes which the other editors have done always, and which indeed the state of the text may sufficiently justify.

147. The greater part of readers, instead of blaming us for passing trifles, will wonder that on mere trifles so much labour is expended, with such importance of debate, and such solemnity of diction. To these I answer with confidence that they are judging of an art which they do not understand; yet cannot much reproach them with their ignorance nor promise that they would become in general, by learning criticism, more useful, happier, or wiser.

148. As I practised conjecture more, I learned to trust it less; and after I had printed a few plays, resolved to insert none of my own readings in the text. Upon this caution I now congratulate myself, for every day increases my doubt of my emendations.

149. Since I have confined my imagination to the margin, it must not be considered as very reprehensible if I have suffered it to play some freaks in its own dominion. There is no danger in conjecture if it be proposed as conjecture; and while the next remains uninjured, those changes may be safely offered which are not considered even by him that offers them as necessary or safe.

150. If my readings are of little value, they have not been ostentatiously displayed or importunately obtruded. I could have written longer notes, for the art of writing notes is not of difficult attainment. The work is performed, first by railing at the stupidity, negligence, ignorance, and asinine tastelessness of the former editors, and showing, from all that goes before and all that follows,

the inelegance and absurdity of the old reading ; then by proposing something which to superficial readers would seem specious, but which the editor rejects with indignation ; then by producing the true reading, with a long paraphrase, and concluding with loud acclamations on the discovery and a sober wish for the advancement and prosperity of genuine criticism.

151. All this may be done, and perhaps done sometimes without impropriety. But I have always suspected that the reading is right which requires many words to prove it wrong ; and the emendation wrong that cannot without so much labour appear to be right. The justness of a happy restoration strikes at once, and the moral precept may be well applied to criticism, *quod dubitas ne feceris.*

152. To dread the shore which he sees spread with wrecks is natural to the sailor. I had before my eye so many critical adventures ended in miscarriage that caution was forced upon me. I encountered in every page Wit struggling with its own sophistry, and Learning confused by the multiplicity of its views. I was forced to censure those whom I admired and could not but reflect, while I was dispossessing their emendations, how soon the same fate might happen to my own, and how many of the readings which I have corrected may be by some other editor defended and established.

> Critics I saw, that others' names efface,
> And fix their own with labour in the place ;
> Their own, like others, soon their place resign'd,
> Or disappear'd and left the first behind. (Pope)

153. That a conjectural critic should often be mistaken, cannot be wonderful, either to others or himself, if it be considered that in his art there is no system, no principal and axiomatical truth that regulates subordinate positions. His chance of error is renewed at every attempt ; an oblique view of the passage, a slight misapprehension of a phrase, a casual inattention to the parts connected, is sufficient to make him not only fail, but fail ridiculously ; and when he succeeds best, he produces perhaps but one reading of many probable, and he that suggests another will always be able to dispute his claims.

154. It is an unhappy state in which danger is hid under pleasure. The allurements of emendation are scarcely resistible. Conjecture has all the joy and all the pride of invention, and he that has once started a happy change is too much delighted to consider what objections may rise against it.

155. Yet conjectural criticism has been of great use in the learned world ; nor is it my intention to depreciate a study that has exercised so many mighty minds, from the revival of learning to our own age, from the bishop of Aleria to English Bentley. The

critics on ancient authors have, in the exercise of their sagacity, many assistances which the editor of Shakespeare is condemned to want. They are employed upon grammatical and settled languages, whose construction contributes so much to perspicuity that Homer has fewer passages unintelligible than Chaucer. The words have not only a known regimen but invariable quantities, which direct and confine the choice. There are commonly more manuscripts than one; and they do not often conspire in the same mistakes. Yet Scaliger could confess to Salmasius how little satisfaction his emendations gave him. *Illudunt nobis conjecturae nostrae, quarum nos pudet, posteaquam in meliores codices incidimus.* And Lipsius could complain that critics were making faults by trying to, remove them, *Ut olim vitiis, ita nunc remediis laboratur.* And indeed, where mere conjecture is to be used, the emendations of Scaliger and Lipsius, notwithstanding their wonderful sagacity and erudition, are often vague and disputable, like mine or Theobald's.

156. Perhaps I may not be more censured for doing wrong than for doing little; for raising in the public expectations which at last I have not answered. The expectation of ignorance is indefinite, and that of knowledge is often tyrannical. It is hard to satisfy those who know not what to demand, or those who demand by design what they think impossible to be done. I have indeed disappointed no opinion more than my own; yet I have endeavoured to perform my task with no slight solicitude. Not a single passage in the whole work has appeared to me corrupt which I have not attempted to restore; or obscure which I have not endeavoured to illustrate. In many I have failed, like others; and from many, after all my efforts, I have retreated and confessed the repulse. I have not passed over, with affected superiority, what is equally difficult to the reader and to myself, but, where I could not instruct him, have owned my ignorance. I might easily have accumulated a mass of seeming learning upon easy scenes; but it ought not to be imputed to negligence that, where nothing was necessary, nothing has been done, or that, where others have said enough, I have said no more.

157. Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils. Let him that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play, from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators. When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not stoop at correction or explanation. When his attention is strongly engaged, let it disdain alike to turn aside to the name of Theobald and of Pope. Let him read on through brightness and obscurity, through integrity and corruption; let him preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable. And when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let him attempt exactness and read the commentators.

158. Particular passages are cleared by notes, but the general effect of the work is weakened. The mind is refrigerated by interruption; the thoughts are diverted from the principal subject; the reader is weary, he suspects not why, and at last throws away the book which he has too diligently studied.

159. Parts are not to be examined till the whole has been surveyed; there is a kind of intellectual remoteness necessary for the comprehension of any great work in its full design and its true proportions; a close approach shows the smaller niceties, but the beauty of the whole is discerned no longer.

160. It is not very grateful to consider how little the succession of editors has added to this author's power of pleasing. He was read, admired, studied, and imitated, while he was yet deformed with all the improprieties which ignorance and neglect could accumulate upon him; while the reading was yet not rectified nor his allusions understood; yet then did Dryden pronounce that

> Shakespeare was the man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the greater commendation; he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is many times flat and insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of poets.
>
> Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.

161 It is to be lamented that such a writer should wa t a commentary; that his language should become obsolete or his senti·ments obscure. But it is vain to carry wishes beyond the condition of human things; that which must happen to all, has happened to Shakespeare, by accident and time; and more than has been suffered by any other writer since the use of types has been suffered by him through his own negligence of fame or perhaps by that superiority of mind which despised its own performances when it compared them with its powers, and judged those works unworthy to be preserved which the critics of following ages were to contend for the fame of restoring and explaining.

162. Among these candidates of inferior fame, I am now to stand the judgement of the public ; and wish that I could confidently produce my commentary as equal to the encouragement which I have had the honour of receiving. Every work of this kind is by its nature deficient, and I should feel little solicitude about the sentence were it to be pronounced only by the skilful and the learned.

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11

Notes

Paragraph Number

2. **While an author is yet living......by his best**—Here is an example of what is known as "parallelism". The first part of the sentence is balanced by the second part—"while an author is yet living" and "when he is dead"; "by his worst performance" and "by his best".

3. **As among the works of nature, etc.**—Johnson's writings abound in illustrations. Here is an illustration from the world of nature.

   Pythagorean scale of numbers—Pythagoras was a famous Greek philosopher born in 580 B C. He greatly advanced mathematical, geometrical, and astronomical sciences. One of his discoveries was that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of squares on the other two sides.

   the poems of Homer—Homer was an ancient Greek poet. His date is variously placed between 1050 and 850 B.C. He wrote the famous epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

5. **The poet of whose works, etc.**—The reference is to Shakespeare, who is the subject of the *Preface*.

8. **In the writings of other poets......a species**—This is another example of parallelism or balance.

9. **Euripides**—an ancient Greek dramatist (480—406 B.C.). His plays, all tragedies, include *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, *Electra*, *Orestes*, and *Bacchae*. It was Cicero who remarked that every verse of Euripides was a precept.

   like the pedant in Hierocles—Hierocles was a neo-Platonist philosopher of the 5th century A.D. He mentions the case of the fellow who carried a brick in his pocket to show as a specimen of his house to prospective buyers. Johnson gives this as an example or illustration of the folly of proving Shakespeare's excellence by means of selected quotations.

10. **It was observed of the ancient schools of declamation, etc.**—another illustration intended to clarify an argument.

12. **I will not say with Pope, etc.**—Pope, in his edition of Shakespeare's plays, had expressed the opinion that every character portrayed by the dramatist could be recognized by his speeches and that every speech could, therefore, be assigned to a character as having been made by that character. This was a proof that Shakespeare's characters were distinguishable, one from the other. Johnson does not go so far as Pope but he broadly agrees that Shakespeare's characters are distinct individuals.

15. **Dennis**—John Dennis (1657—1734), known for his critical works including *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare.*

Rymer—Thomas Rymer (1641—1713) wrote, among other things, *A Short View of Tragedy* in which he condemned *Othello.*

Voltaire—Voltaire (1694—1778) was a prolific French writer and philosopher. In his *Lettres sur les Anglais* and elsewhere he condemned Shakespeare for lack of taste and ignorance of the classical rules of the drama.

Menenuis—the name of a character in Shakespeares's Roman play, *Coriolanus.*

Danish usurper—Claudius who in *Hamlet* usurps the throne of his brother, the King of Denmark.

as a painter, satisfied with the figure, neglects the drapery—another illustration in the form of a simile.

18. **that I do not recollect among the Greeks or Romans, etc.**—A Greek or Roman dramatist was either a writer of tragedies or of comedies. No Greek or Roman dramatist wrote *both* tragedies and comedies. Shakespeare had a genius for both kinds of plays.

20. **but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature**—This remark is often quoted as an example of Johnson's broad outlook. But the contradiction that is implicit here should not be missed. Criticism itself is supposed to be based on nature. The appeal from criticism to nature has therefore little meaning. But, of course, Johnson would say that by criticism he means theoretical rules which are laid down for the writers and which in course of time become hardened formulas.

27. **The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety...... heard with applause**—Johnson here answers the criticism of *Hamlet* and *Othello* by Voltaire and Rymer. In the case of *Hamlet,* Johnson justifies (1) the opening of the play with a dialogue between two sentinels, (2) the character of Polonius who is more or less a comic figure, and (3) the comic scene of

the grave-diggers which was thought inappropriate in a serious and tragic play. In the case of *Othello*, Johnson defends the rather crude manner in which the villain Iago shouts at the window of a nobleman Brabantio whose daughter Desdemona has secretly married the black Moor. This is how Iago speaks:

> "Awake ! what ho, Brabantio !
> Thieves, thieves, thieves !
> Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags.
> Thieves, thieves."

And he goes on to inform Brabantio, in vulgar terms, of Desdemona's love-affair with Othello.

28. **and his disposition, as Rymer has remarked, led him to comedy**—Johnson endorses Rymer's view that Shakespeare's natural bent of mind lay in the direction of comedy. But this view would not be accepted by any modern critic. Shakespeare's genius for comedy cannot be questioned, but his real greatness is to be seen in his tragic plays.

His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct—Here is a good example of Johnson's use of parallelism. Besides, this sentence reads like an epigram.

29. **The adventitious pecularities of personal habits are only superficial dyes......passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare**—These lines well illustrate the rich, figurative style of Johnson. The idea has been expressed by the use of several metaphors.

31. **Shakespeare's familiar dialogue......with protuberances and cavities**—Here are two very apt similes to illustrate and clarify the idea.

36. **These faults Pope has endeavoured... ...interpolators**—Pope, in his Preface to Shakespeare, had expressed the view that Shakespeare's disregard in this respect was due not to any neglect by the bard but to interpolations (=insertions) by other hands. Johnson, disagreeing, attributes the fault to Shakespeare himself. (The fault is the many anachronisms that are to be found in Shakespeare's plays).

We need not wonder to find Hector quoting Aristotle... ...mythology of fairies—Johnson here gives two specific instances of the fault of anachronism. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Hector (the Trojan warrior) is heard quoting Aristotle, although in point of time Aristotle came much later than Hector who fought in the War of Troy. In *As You Like It*, we find the ancient love-affair of Theseus and Hippolyta placed side by side with the Gothic mythology of later times. (Fairies—Oberon, Titania, Puck, etc.—belong to Gothic mythology). Both these are examples of Shakespeare's disregard of chronology.

For in the same age Sidney......in his *Arcadia*—Sir Philip Sidney (1554—86) was an Elizabethan nobleman all whose works were published after his death. *Arcadia*, a prose romance (published in 1590) was written by Sidney for the amusement of his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. At the end of each of its books, this work has a pastoral eclogue. Arcadia is depicted as a land of flowery meadows where shepherd-boys pipe and sing as though they would never grow old.

49. **Corneille**—Pierre Corneille (1606—84) was a French dramatist of the classical school. His severe and dignified style and strict classical tradition were much admired by contemporary English playwrights and critics.

51. **the dragons of Medea**—Medea, in ancient Greek mythology, was an enchantress. She helped Jason to obtain the golden fleece.

Alexandria, Thebes, Persepolis—names of various ancient cities. Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in Egypt. Thebes was a city in Greece, and was the scene of the misfortunes of Oedipus. Persepolis was the capital of the Persian empire, and is mentioned by Marlowe in *Tamerlane*.

53. **Ptolemies**—Egyptian kings of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Actium—a town and promontory at the entrance of the Ambracian Gulf (Gulf of Arta) on the west coast of Greece. Here Augustus won his naval victory over Antony and Cleopatra on 2nd September, 31 B.C.

the plain of Pharsalia—the scene of Caesar's victory over Pompey in 48 B.C.

the bank of Granicus—Granicus was the name of a river in Asia Minor. On its banks Alexander gained, in 334 B.C. the first of the three victories which ended in the overthrow of the Persian empire.

55. **Mithridates, Pontus, Lucullus**—Mithridates (131—63 B.C.) was the King of Pontus. He fought many battles against the Romans. Lucullus was a Roman general who drove Mithridates from Pontus and defeated also his brother-in-law, Tigranes, with whom Mithridates had taken refuge.

Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination—This sentence reads like an epigram. It means that time is most obedient to the demands of the human imagination. The mind of man can imagine the passing of any length or duration of time.

57. **Henry the Fifth**—a historical play by Shakespeare. Its action includes the Battle of Agincourt (fought in 1415) in which Henry V himself took part.

The humour of Petruchio—Petruchio is a character in Shakespeare's comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*. He is the husband of the shrew, Katharina.

Cato—*Cato*, a tragic play, deals with the death by suicide of Porcius Cato at Utica in 46 B.C. when the republican cause was crushed by Caesar.

59. **that his first act passed at Venice and his next in Cyprus**—The reference is to *Othello* (Acts I and II) where this change of place occurs.

Non usque adeo......Caesare tolli—This is a quotation from the Latin writer Lucan's work called *Pharsalia*. It means : "The course of time has not wrought such confusion that the laws would not rather be trampled on by Caesar than saved by Metellus."

62. **as Aeneas withdrew......the besiegers**—A reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*. In the War of Troy the Greek forces besieging the city were being aided by some of the gods like Neptune and goddesses like Juno. Aeneas, the Trojan hero, thought it better not to pit himself against the might of the deities. So, on seeing Neptune and Juno actively leading and helping the Greeks, he withdrew from the defence of the city. Johnson likewise feels like withdrawing from a defence of his position when he sees the powerful critics arrayed against him. (The position he has taken up is that an adherence to the "unities" is not essential.)

64. **The palaces of Peru or Mexico......use of iron ?**—Johnson is constantly offering illustrations to support his argument. Shakespeare's plays were much in advance of the standards of his age. This shows that his genuis transcended the limitations of his times. The palaces of Peru or Mexico were greatly inferior to European palaces but the fact that they were built without the use of iron shows the marvellous skill of the architects who erected them.

65. **philology**—the science of language.

Henry the Eighth—King of England from 1509 to 1547.

Lily, Linacre, etc.—We have here the names of several humanists and scholars. William Lily (1468—1522) was the author of a Latin grammar believed to have been used by Shakespeare. Thomas Linacre (1460—1524) and Sir John Cheke (1514—57) were teachers of Greek at Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Stephen Gardiner (1493—1555) and Reginald Pole (1500—58) were churchmen and chancellors of Cambridge University. Sir Thomas More (1478—1535) is famous as the author of *Utopia* (written in Latin). Sir Thomas Smith and Walter Haddon were regius professors of civil law and vice-chancellors of Cambridge University. John Clerk

was Bishop of Bath and Wells. Roger Ascham (1515—68) was private tutor to Queen Elizabath and author of *Toxophilus* and *The Schoolmaster*.

66. **The study of those......volume**—The popular taste of the time had a preference for romantic and adventure stories dealing with giants, dragons, and magic. Sir Thomas Malory's *Death of Arthur* (published in 1485) had a great vogue because it appealed to the popular taste.

67. *Palemerin* was a Spanish prose romance translated into English in 1588.

Guy of Warwick was an English verse romance written about 1308 but published early in the 16th century.

People of Shakespeare's time were fond of reading such stuff. Shakespeare, though a realistic dramatist had to satisfy the public taste by including in his plays stirring and sensational incidents.

The mind which has feasted......of truth—Here is an example of Johnson's talent for epigrammatic statements.

and that incredibility......unskilful curiosity—a good example of compression in style.

69. **Chaucer's** *Gamelyn*—Subsequent research showed that the tale of *Gamelyn* was not written by Chaucer.

a little pamphlet of those times—It was Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590) that served as the immediate source of the story for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Mr. Cibber—Colley Cibber (1671—1757) was an actor and playwright. He was made the poet laureate in 1730, and was fiercely attacked in consequence by other writers. (Pope made him the hero of his *Dunciad* in the final edition of that poem). **Saxo Grammaticus**—He was a Danish historian (1150—1206).

70. **Plutarch's** *Lives*......**by North**—Sir Thomas North (1535—1601) became famous for his translations. He rendered Plutarch's *Lives* into English, and this translation served as Shakespeare's source for his Roman plays. Plutarch was an ancient Greek biographer. His chief work was the biographies of twentythree Greek and twentythree Romans, arranged in pairs. (Sir Thomas North's version was a rendering into English of a French translation of them).

73. *Cato*—a tragedy by Addison, produced in 1713. The political excitement when the play was produced—the question of the succession was acute—contributed to the success of a drama dealing with Cato's last stand for liberty. It describes the death by suicide of Porcius Cato in 46 B.C. when the republican cause was finally crushed by Caesar. The superiority

of *Othello* over *Cato* cannot be questioned, and Johnson gives a suitable reply to Voltaire's criticism of the former play.

74. **The work of a correct and regular writer......with a mass of meaner minerals**—The whole of this paragraph is an elaborate metaphor and an excellent example of Johnson's figurative style of writing.

76. **he had small Latin, and less Greek**—This is what Ben Jonson said about Shakespeare's want of conventional education and his lack of proficiency in the classical languages.

78. **Go before, I'll follow**—The words occur in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. According to a critic, these words are derived from a sentence in *Andria*, a tragic play by the ancient Roman writer, Terence. The critic's object is to show that Shakespeare did have an original knowledge of ancient classical authors.
I cried to sleep again—The words, spoken by Caliban, occur in Shakespeare's *The Tempest.*

Anacreon—an ancient Greek lyric poet of the sixth century B.C.

The words quoted from *The Tempest* are derived directly from Anacreon, or so some critics said. But Johnson sees no evidence that Shakespeare had any direct knowledge of classical authors.

80. ***Menaechmi* of Plautus**—Titus Plautus (254—184 B.C.) was a famous comic poet twenty of whose comedies are now extant. Several of his plays have been imitated by Shakespeare, Moliere, and others. Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is, in the main, an adaptation of Plautus's play *Menaechmi.*

81. *Romeo and Juliet*—Shakespeare's tragedy is based on an Italian romance by Bandello, translated into English.

86. **Rowe is of opinion, etc.**—Nicholas Rowe (1674—1718) was a playwright and critic. He became poet laureate in 1715. He did useful work as an editor of Shakespeare's plays (1709), dividing them into acts and scenes, supplying stage directions, and generally making the text more intelligible. Rowe was of the opinion that Shakespeare's youthful works were the best and that we should not trace the development of his mind in his works. Johnson rejects this view.

87. **Our author had both matter and form..... in its native colours**—Chaucer has been regarded as the father of English poetry. His chief claim to distinction is his realistic portrayal of life and character in *The Canterbury Tales* and especially in the *Prologue* to that great work.

89. **Boyle**—Charles Boyle, fourth Earl of Orrery (1676—1731) was the editor of the spurious *Epistles of Phalaris*. (Phalaris was a tyrant of the 6th century B.C. Certain letters attributed to him were praised by Sir William Temple and cited by

Charles Boyle in 1695. Richard Bentley showed that the letters were spurious). But Johnson's reference here is to Thomas Birch's *Life of the Hon. Robert Boyle* which appeared in 1744.

as dew-drops from a lion's mane—The simile is taken from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* Act III, scene iii line 224.

91. **the ignorant feel his representations to be just, and the learned see that they are complete**—This is an example of Johnson's habit of writing "balanced" sentences.

92. **Dennis**—John Dennis (1657—1734) was the author of *Rinaldo and Armida* (1699) and other tragedies, one of which *Appius and Virginia* (1709) was satirized for its bombast by Pope (in his Essay on Criticism : III 585—8). He is best known for his critical works, which include *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), and *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* (1712). The quotation here is taken from the last-named work.

dissyllable and trisyllable terminations—the last word of a line consisting of two or three syllables. Dennis means that some lines in Shakespeare end with words of two syllables and some lines with words of three syllables.

93. **Hieronimo**—Thomas Kyd wrote the *Spanish Tragedy* in 1592. Its alternative title was *Hieronimo is Mad Again*. (The political background of the play was the victory of Spain over Portugal in 1580).

Gorboduc—one of the earliest of English tragedies. It was written by Norton and Sackville, and acted in 1561. Its other title was *Ferrex and Porrex*.

94. **Spenser**—Edmund Spenser (1552—1599), author of *The Fairie Queene* and other works, and famous for the harmony and melody of his verse.

95. **modern critic**—Johnson refers to John Upton, the author of *Critical Observations on Shakespeare*.

97. **Congreve's four comedies**—William Congreve (1670—1729) achieved fame by his comedy, *The Old Bachelor* (1693). His other comedies were *The Double Dealer* (1694), *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700). In these Congreve appears as the supreme master of what is known as the "comedy of manners."

98. **little "declined into the vale of years"**—not yet grown old. The phrase is taken from *Othello* Act III, scene iii, line 270. Speaking to himself the Moor says :

> Haply, for I am black,
> And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have, or I am *declined*
Into the vale of years,—

102. **Dr. Warburton**—William Warburton (1698—1770) rose to be bishop of Gloucester in 1759. He was much engaged in theological controversy, writing with vigour and arrogance. He brought out in 1747 an edition of Shakespeare which was sharply criticized, and in 1751 an edition of Pope's works. He was a bad scholar, a literary bully, and a man of untrustworthy character. Johnson's reference is to the following remark in Warburton's Preface to his edition of Shakespeare: "The stubborn nonsense with which he was encrusted occasioned his lying long neglected amongst the common lumber of the stage."

103. **Rowe**—see note on paragraph 86 above.

104. **Mr. Pope**—Alexander Pope (1688—1744) was the greatest poet of the 18th century. He was a great critic too. In 1725 he published an edition of Shakespeare's plays. Lewis Theobald, in 1726, published his *Shakespeare Restored*, exposing the incapacity as a critic shown by Pope in his edition of Shakespeare. This infuriated Pope who made Theobald the hero of his *Dunciad**. But we owe to Theobald's edition of Shakespeare (1734) many valuable restorations and emendations.

105. **Heming and Condell**—John Heming and Henry Condell were fellow actors of Shakespeare. They jointly edited the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays in 1633. (Heming is said to have been the first actor to play the role of Falstaff.)

106. **the dull duty of an editor**—At the end of his Preface (1725) to his edition of Shakespeare's plays, Pope had written: "I have discharged the dull duty of an editor, to my best judgment, with more labour than I expect thanks, with a religious abhorrence of all innovation, and without any indulgence to my private sense or conjecture." Johnson does not agree that an editor's duty is dull and so he concludes this paragraph by saying: "Let us now be told no more of the dull duty of an editor."

109. **Theobald**—Lewis Theobald (1684—1744), author of poems, essays, and dramatic works. He published his edition of Shakespeare's plays in 1734. (See also note on Pope above). Johnson expresses an unfavourable opinion of Theobald's intellectual calibre though he gives him some credit by saying: "but what little he did was commonly right".

111. **The exuberant excrescence of diction......of the rest**—This sentence shows one aspect of Johnson's style. There are

*In 1729, however, Pope replaced Theobald by Cibber as the hero of *Dunciad*.

three co-ordinate clauses in the first half of this sentence, each clause bringing out some defect of Theobald and telling us what Johnson did in respect of it—"lopped", "suppressed" and "concealed". The sentence becomes emphatic, if a trifle verbose.

112. **Theobald, thus weak and ignorent......no man can envy**—The whole of this paragraph is a good example of Johnson's manner of writing. There are the pairs of words : "weak and ignorant", "mean and faithless", "petulant and ostentatious". Then there are the parallelisms : so willingly does the world support *those who solicit favour*, against *those who command reverence* ; and *so easily is he praised whom no man can envy*.

113. **Our author fell then into the hands of Sir Thomas Hanmer**—The next to edit the plays of Shakespeare was Sir Thomas Hanmer. (Johnson is commenting upon the performance of each of the scholars who edited Shakespeare before him—Rowe, Pope, Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton).

117. **Of the last editor**—namely, Warburton who published his edition of Shakespeare in 1747. (See note on paragraph 102 above).

Respect is due to high place, tenderness to living reputation, and veneration to genius and learning—a characteristic example of Johnson's habit of using triplets.

118. **His notes exhibit......conjectures**—The parallelism is to be noted : "sometimes perverse interpretations", "sometimes improbable conjectures".

he at one time......absurdities—more of parallelism.

120. **The first care of the builder of a new system is to demolish the fabrics which are standing**—Johnson gives plenty of illustrations to clarify and emphasize his ideas.

121. **How canst thou beg for life, says Achilles to his captive, ...by Achilles**—Here is another illustration. Every scholar who exposes the faults and errors of his predecessors should know that his own faults and errors will be exposed by those who come after him How could the captive of Achilles be allowed to escape death when Achilles himself was subject to death ?

122. **The Canons of Criticism**—a book by Thomas Edwards who attacked Warburton's edition of Shakespeare's plays. Warburton afterwards described him as a "libeller" and "a Grub-street critic run to seed".

Revisal of Shakespeare's Text—Its author was Benjamin Heath who published the *Revisal* in 1765.

Of whom one ridicules his errors with airy petulance... ...to leave inflammations and gangrene behind him—This is an example of the use of parallelism, similes and metaphors.

When I think on one... ..in *Macbeth*—The idea is made clear with the use of illustrations from two of Shakespeare's plays. Illustrations are frequent with Johnson.

124. **Mr. Upton**—John Upton published his *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* in 1746.

Every cold empiric......frolics in conjecture—Johnson's tendency to generalize.

125. **Dr. Grey**—Zachary Grey published his *Critical, Historical, and Explanatory Notes* on Shakespeare in two volumes in 1754.

127. **small things make mean men proved**—based on a line in *Henry VI*, Act IV, scene i: "Small things make base men proud".

128. **That to which all would be indifferent......can exalt to spirit**—The first sentence here is an example of a generalization; the second shows Johnson's figurative manner of writing.

133. **To time I have been obliged, etc.**—Johnson here confesses his inability to have understood the meaning of some of Shakespeare's passages. This modesty, expressed also at a couple of other places in this *Preface*, is unusual in Johnson who was generally categorical and sweeping in his pronouncements.

and to an editor nothing is a trifle by which his author is obscured—a very sound observation.

134. **The reader, I believe, is seldom......necessary**—These are all generalisations.

Of all skill, part is infused by precept, and part is obtained by habit—An example of epigrammatic writing.

136. **the violence of the contention between Pope and Theobald**—Pope had felt greatly annoyed by Theobald's corrections of what Theobald believed to be errors in Pope's text of Shakespeare. Theobald had not meant to hurt Pope's feelings by his book *Shakespeare Restored, or a Specimen of the Many Errors as well Committed as Unamended by Mr. Pope in his late Edition of this Poet; designed not only to correct the said Edition, but to restore the true Reading of Shakespeare in all the Editions ever Published.* But Pope, taking offence, made Theobald the hero of his *Dunciad* (the empire of Dullness) which he began thus: "Book and the man I sing*."

* This was a parody of the epic manner. Virgil had begun his *Aeneid* thus: "Arms and the man I sing."

The man was Theobald, the book *Shakespeare Restored*. And thus the controversy went on for some time.

140. **Rowe's regulation of the text**—Although Rowe's text of Shakespeare left much to be desired, his work was a step in the right direction. Rowe had made Shakespeare not only more easily accessible in his six handy volumes, but also more easily intelligible.

143. **Huetius**—Pierre Huet was the author of *De interpretatione* (1661).

I have adopted the Roman sentiment, etc.—Here is an appropriate illustration and an example of the figurative style of the writer.

145. **A busy eye steadily fixed upon evanescent atoms or a discursive mind upon evanescent truth**—The first part "a busy eye......atoms" is here balanced by the second "a discursive mind......truth."

147. **With such importance of debate, and such solemnity of diction**—another example of parallelism; also of the use of substantives: "importance", "solemnity".

148. **As I practised......it less**—an example of antithesis.

151. **But I have always suspected......to be right**—The use of antithesis is noteworthy.

quod dubitas ne feceris—"When in doubt, don't do it." Johnson means that, wherever he had a doubt, he allowed the text to stand as it was, without trying to emend it. He made emendations when only convinced that they were called for.

152. **Critics I saw, etc** The four lines of verse quoted here are taken from Pope's *Temple of Fame*.

153. **an oblique view of the passage, a slight misapprehension of a phrase, a casual inattention to the parts connected, etc.**—an example of what a commentator called "triptology" of which Johnson was rather fond. It was Horace Walpole who coined this label for Johnson's habit of employing three parallel expressions in succession.

155. **from the bishop of Aleria of English Bentley**—The bishop of Aleria was Joannes Andreas (1417—1480). He was librarian to Pope Sixtus IV. Richard Bentley (1662—1742) was Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, famous for his emendations of the texts of certain ancient authors. By mentioning these two, Johnson wishes to convey the wide range of scholarship engaged in "conjectural criticism".

Scaliger could confess to Salmasius—Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540—1609) was the greatest scholar of the Renaissance. He has been described as "the founder of

historical criticism". He edited Manilius, reconstructed / the lost chronicle of Eusebius, and issued critical editions of many classical authors. Salmasius (Claude De Saumaise) was an eminent scholar (1588—1653). He was a professor at Leyden University in 1649.

Illudunt nobis conjecturae nostrae etc.—Latin: "Our conjectures make us look silly; we are ashamed of them after we have come upon better manuscripts."

Lipsius—Justus Lipsius (1547—1606) was a Flemish humanist. He was a professor at Leyden, being succeeded there by Scaliger.

Ut olim vitiis, etc.—The paraphrase is provided by Johnson himself: "the critics were making faults by trying to remove them."

156. **The expectation of ignorance is indefinite, and that of knowledge is often tyrannical**—An example of parallelism, and also of the epigrammatic manner. This is one of the many generalisations by Johnson.

160. **Shakespeare was the man, etc.**—This long quotation is taken from *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* by Dryden.
Quantum lenta......cupressi—from Virgil's *Eclogues*: "... ...as cypresses do among the bending osiers."

161. **Since the use of types**—*i.e.*, since the invention of printing. (The idea is that much of Shakespeare's text was corrupted or distorted by printers).

But it is vain to carry wishes ......restoring and explaining—an example of the elaborate sentences of which Johnson is fond.

162. **Every work of this kind, etc.**—another of the several touches of modesty in this essay.

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12

Questions with Answers

Q. 1. What are the grounds of Johnson's admiration for Shakespeare as a dramatist and how far does his reasoning convince you ?

Or

What, according to Johnson, are the merits of Shakespeare's plays ? To what extent do you agree with his observations in his respect ?

Or

How does Johnson reply to the following question posed by him ? "It is proper to inquire by what peculiarities of excellence Shakespeare has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen." How far is Johnson justified in his reply ?

Ans. The key to Shakespeare's greatness, in Johnson's opinion, lies in the fact that he is, above all writers, the poet of nature. Shakespeare is the poet who holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not to be identified by what is local or temporary, or by peculiarities which are understood only by small numbers of readers. His characters are the genuine product of common humanity. They are such as the world will always produce. In other words, they have a universal appeal. They act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles which are experienced by all mankind. A character portrayed by Shakespeare is not generally an individual but a species : "In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species."

In pointing out the realistic quality of Shakespeare's dramas and the universality of his characters, Johnson has hit the nail on the head. Indeed, although many of Shakespeare's plots are improbable and wild, the truth of human nature and human psychology as depicted by him is never in doubt. Such characters as Hamlet, Macbeth, Cordelia, Desdemona, Rosalind, Portia, Orlando, Bassanio, Antonio, Shylock, Falstaff, and many others are unforgettable because of their universal appeal. Shakespeare's gallery of characters has never been equalled. He shows an

encyclopaedic knowledge of human nature not as it is to be observed in particular countries and climes but as it is met with all over the world. Johnson is also right in telling us that Shakespeare kept his characters distinct from one another. No speech made by a Shakespearean character can properly be transferred to any other Shakespearean character. In other words, there is no blurring of characters, and no character shades off into another. Thus Johnson does not overlook the individual quality of Shakespeare's characters when he emphasises their representative quality.

Continuing his comments on characterisation, Johnson tells us that Shakespeare does not depict persons of either fabulous excellence or unexampled depravity. Thus there is no extravagance or exaggeration in his character-portrayal. The speakers in his plays are men who act and speak as the reader thinks that he would himself have spoken or acted on a particular occasion. Furthermore, he has shown human nature not only as it acts in real situations but as it will be found in situations which may never arise. Nobody can quarrel with this analysis of Shakespeare's realism.

Shakespeare was most original in his portrayal of characters, Johnson goes on to say. No writer before, with the possible exception of Chaucer, had portrayed human character in a realistic manner. Shakespeare's achievement in this field becomes all the greater when we remember that the science of psychology had not yet started its investigations into the nature and working of the human mind, and that Shakespeare gathered his knowledge of human nature and human character from his own personal observation. In spite of his handicaps, Shakespeare was able to acquire an exact knowledge of many modes of life and many kinds of temperament. This knowledge enabled him to portray a multiplicity and diversity of character and to reveal subtle distinctions between man and man. In this respect, he had none to imitate, though he himself was imitated by all succeeding writers. Whether life or nature be his subject, he gives evidence of having seen things with his own eyes. Nothing in his work is second-hand. Here, again, Johnson states what is undoubtedly true.

It is because of the universality of his characterisation that Shakespeare's plays are full of practical axioms and domestic wisdom. From his plays may be collected a system of civil and economic prudence. More maxims of theoretical knowledge and more rules of practical action are to be found in his dramas than in the works of all his successors. Yet his distinction lies not in the splendour of particular passages but in the individual plays as a whole. Selected quotations from his plays can never give us a correct idea of his real greatness. In spite of the convincing simile which Johnson gives in this connection, we wonder whether judicious selections from Shakespearean drama would really fail to give the

reader some idea of the bard's profundity of thought and felicity of expression. Suppose we were to read the speeches of Brutus and Antony in *Julius Caesar*, the Quality of Mercy speech of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Hamlet's soliloquy : "To be or not to be", the scene of Othello's murder of Desdemona, Macbeth's speech "Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow", would we not thrill to them all even if they were isolated from the plays ? Readers have been known to enjoy that small book called "Famous Scenes from Shakespeare".

Shakespeare's realism, says Johnson, is to be seen also in the fact that he does not give undue prominence to the passion of love in his plays. Dramatists in general give an excessive importance to the theme of love. A play will centre round a lover, a lady, and a rival, and the entanglement in their mutual relations. In developing the theme of love, a dramatist will often violate probability and misrepresent life. Shakespeare knew that love is only one of many passions of mankind, and that its influence on the totality of life is extremely limited. It is startling to find Johnson anticipating Bernard Shaw, and more startling still to be told in a commentary on the author of *Romeo and Juliet* that love "has little operation in the drama of a poet who caught his ideas from the living world." It is, indeed, a striking fact, little observed, that Shakespeare wrote so many plays in which the love interest hardly has any place. *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolonus* are some obvious examples.

Johnson also points out the realistic quality of Shakespeare's dialogues. The dialogue in Shakespeare's plays, he says, is often determined by the incident which produces it, and it seems to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences. Johnson defends Shakespeare against the charges brought by Dennis and Rymer who thought that the Roman characters in his plays were not sufficiently Roman, and by Voltaire who complained that the kings in Shakespearean plays did not behave completely as kings. Johnson justifies Shakespeare's characterisation of Menenius in *Coriolanus* and of King Claudius in *Hamlet*. The objections of these critics are, according to Johnson, examples of petty-minded fault-finding. Johnson also defends Shakespeare for his mingling of the tragic and comic elements in his plays on grounds of realism. Such mingling only serves to show us the course of the world in which the loss of one man is the gain of another, in which the reveller is hurrying to his wine and the mourner to a funeral, and in which the malice of one is sometimes exceeded by the frolic of another. Nor does Johnson disapprove of Shakespeare's violation of the unities of place and time. If an audience in a theatre can accept the stage as a locality in the city of Rome, they will also accept the change from Rome to Alexandria. The unity of time may likewise be violated on the same principle.

In arguing thus, Johnson shows himself to be a critic ahead of his times.

Pointing out the superiority of Shakespeare's *Othell*› to Addison's *Cato*, Johnson says that *Othello* is the vigorous and lively product of genius working upon actual observations of life,, while *Cato* fails to acquaint us with human sentiments or human actions. Shakespeare is not a "correct" and "regular" writer, but his dramas contain infinite riches, even though the riches in them are mingled with much that is crude and low. This is an astute observation by Johnson.

Shakespeare, says Johnson, was the originator of "the form, the character, the language, and the shows" of English drama. He was the first playwright whose tragic as well as comic plays succeeded in providing the dramatic pleasure appropriate to them. He was the first, with the possible exception of Spenser, to discover the degree of smoothness and harmony which the English language was capable of attaining. He often strikes by the force and vigour of his dialogue, but he executes his purpose better when he tries to soothe by softness.

Thus Johnson shows his penetrating power which probes to the very core of Shakespeare's art, and reveals its deep humanity and its sovereign realism. Of course, we cannot agree that Shakespeare is better in his comedies than in his tragedies, but Johnson's praise of Shakespeare as the dramatist of realism *par excellence* is wholly justified and convincing. Johnson says little, too, of the sublime poetry of Shakespeare, and he does not anticipate the kind of criticism which afterwards came from Goethe and Coleridge. But he was among the first to suggest the historical and comparative point of view in criticism. and he rightly relates Shakespeare to the age in which the dramatist lived. Never surely has the central praise of Shakespeare, as the master of truth and universality, been better set forth than by Johnson. In a series of eloquent paragraphs, Johnson tries Shakespeare by the tests of time, of nature, of universality, and finds him supreme in all.

Q. 2. What, according to Johnson, are the faults of Shakespeare? To what extent do you agree with him in this respect?

Or

"Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit." How does Johnson illustrate this criticism?

Or

What are the charges that Johnson brings against Shakespeare as a dramatist and with what justification?

Or

"The detailed analysis of the faults of Shakespeare is a fine piece of criticism, and has never been seriously challenged." Discuss with reference to Johnson's *Preface*.

Ans. Johnson does not consider Shakespeare to be a faultless dramatist. Shakespeare's first defect, according to Johnson, is that "he sacrifices virtue to convenience". Shakespeare tries more to please his audience than to instruct them. He does so to such an extent that he seems "to write without any moral purpose". Whatever precepts and axioms occur in his plays were written "causally" by him. He makes "no just distribution of good or evil." His virtuous characters do not express a frank disapproval of wickedness. He "carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong, and at the end dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance." This fault is serious because of the fact that it is always a writer's duty to make the world morally better.

It is not possible to agree with Johnson in his condemnation of Shakespeare on moral grounds. The question that arises here is whether we really expect a writer to make it his business to inculcate virtue. Must a writer by intention be a preacher or a moral philosopher ? Johnson adopts a purely neo-classic point of view which emphasises the didactic purpose of literature as much as its pleasing quality. All that we can expect from an artist is that he should give us a picture of life as he sees it. The artist's business is to communicate to us his vision of life. If this vision incidentally happens to have a morally elevating effect, well and good ; but didacticism is not a basic condition of art. It is no small merit in a comic artist to be able to divert and amuse the world without making it worse. Besides, Johnson himself admits that "a system of social duty may be selected from Shakespeare's writings." And that should have more than satisfied the critic. We may also assert that Shakespeare "carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong" for the same reason as he makes them laugh and cry in the same play. In other words, Shakespeare's not-very-strict attitude with regard to morality may be justified on the same principle as his mingling of tragic and comic elements. This principle is an adherence to life as it is. Shakespeare being "the poet of nature" gives us a just representation of life as he found it. He does not restrict the designs of Providence to the narrow bounds of poetical justice, but has shown the sun shining, as it really does, both on the just and the unjust. It is unfortunate that Johnson in this respect should insist upon a rule of criticism when he is bold enough to appeal "from criticism to nature" where the "unities" are concerned. Sir Philip Sidney had argued that poetry should be morally instructive. But he had recognised the fact that, human nature being what it is, life does not convey a moral lesson to the observer, and he therefore demanded that the

poet should create a new and better world. Johnson wants a poet to represent human nature realisatically and accurately. At the same time, he wants the poet to arrange his story in such a manner that it provides moral instruction for the reader, while pleasing him. The position is untenable. Perhaps Johnson did not see the contradiction implied in his position. Johnson seems to agree with Dennis who maintained that the justice a dramatist meted out to his characters ought to be a type of God's final judgment. He did not therefore approve of the death of the innocent Cordelia in *King Lear*.

The remaining charges that Johnson brings against Shakespeare may be dealt with more briefly. Shakespeare's plots, he says, are often very loosely formed and carelessly pursued. He neglects opportunities of giving instruction or pleasure which the development of the plot provides to him. In many of his plays, the latter part does not receive much of his attention. This charge is certainly true. The play of *Julius Caesar* clearly shows a decline of dramatic interest in its second half. At the same time, it must be pointed out that in certain plays Shakespeare shows a perfect sense of construction. Moulton, for instance, has brought out at length the very skilful interweaving of the main plot and the sub-plots in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The next charge is that Shakespeare shows no regard to distinction of time or place. He attributes to a certain nation or a certain period of history the customs, practices, and opinions of another. Thus we find Hector quoting Aristotle in *Troilus and Cressida*, and the love of Theseus and Hippolyta combined with the Gothic mythology of fairies in *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*. However, Johnson admits that Shakespeare was not the only violator of chronology in his time, Sir Philip Sidney having been guilty of the same fault in his *Arcadia*. While we cannot defend Shakespeare against this charge, it must be pointed out that it is comparatively a minor matter and that, in any case, the "barbarity" of Shakespeare's age should extenuate it.

Shakespeare's comic scenes, says Johnson, are seldom very successful when representing witty exchanges between characters. In such scenes, the jests are generally indecent, and the pleasantries licentious. The gentlemen and the ladies in such scenes show little delicacy or refinement and are hardly to be distinguished from the clowns. The coarseness of conversation in Shakespeare's plays cannot be approved, says Johnson. It is not possible for us to accept this charge. Shakespeare had a great genius for writing witty dialogue. He was peculiarly successful in hitting off that kind of sheer wit for which writers like Congreve and Farquhar have been so generally admired. The "reciprocations of smartness and contests of sarcasm" in *Much Ado About Nothing* between Benedick and Beatrice are not inferior to anything of the kind. The witty exchanges in *As You Like It* between Rosalind and Orlando are a

sheer delight, without the least touch of indecency or coarseness, Johnson's derogatory reference to clowns is unjustified, because the wit of Touchstone is admirable indeed. Portia's wit in *The Merchant of Venice* is brilliant and sparkling, and has been compared to the *attar* of roses. It is surprising, indeed, that Shakespeare, whose plays are a rich treasury of wit and humour, should be attacked by Johnson for lack of refinement. It should be remembered that indecency or obscenity is one of the recognised sources of comedy, the only proviso being that this ingredient should be served in a small measure and only occasionally, and should not become a habit. It would be wrong to accuse Shakespeare of habitual indecency. Besides, Johnson evades the issue by leaving indeterminate whether there was a touch of vulgarity in the *real* conversation of ladies and gentlemen of Shakespeare's times.

Johnson does not take a favourable view of Shakespeare's tragic plays, saying: "In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more." Whenever Shakespeare "strains his faculties" in tragic plays, the result is "tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity." This is one of the most outrageous remarks from Johnson's pen. Johnson's rating Shakespeare's comedies above the tragedies is bad enough, but his total disparagement of Shakespeare's performance in tragedy is really unpardonable. Shakespeare's real profundity is to be found in his tragic plays. The truth of nature, for which Johnson so fervidly admires Shakespeare, is to be seen not in the comedies which contain highly improbable plots, but in the tragedies where, apart from the realistic portrayal of character, we have a fairly realistic representation of events. If even the soliloquies only in Shakespeare's tragic plays were taken into consideration, and nothing else, we would yet form a fair idea of Shakespeare's wonderful genius as regards both thought and expression. By his condemnation of Shakespeare's tragic performance. Johnson almost nullifies the high praise he has earlier given to the bard.

Johnson accuses Shakespeare of employing "a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution" in narration. Narration in drama should be rapid and brief, but Shakespeare tries to lend it dignity and splendour which are uncalled for. Shakespeare's "declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak". Shakespeare gets "now and then entangled with an unwieldy sentiment, which he cannot well express". Trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas seem to be recommended by Shakespeare with the use of "sonorous epithets and swelling figures". In reply to all this we can only say that Johnson should have referred to particular passages in order to justify these general assertions. Perhaps much of what Johnson says in regard to Shakespeare's diction is true.

Johnson's next charge is that, when Shakespeare produces the effect of pathos, he soon employs some idle conceit or contemptible

ambiguity. Shakespeare no sooner begins to arouse the reader's sympathy than he counteracts himself. The feelings of terror and pity in the reader's heart are suddenly checked by the dramatist's becoming frigid in his treatment of the situation. Here, again, Johnson seems to be grossly unfair. Not only does he not refer us to particular situations, but he seems to have completely ignored the efficacy of some of the most touching scenes in Shakespeare's dramas and in all literature. It is indeed Shakespeare's "highest excellence" (as Johnson says) to produce the effect of pathos but Shakespeare does not fail or falter as Johnson alleges. Were Johnson right in this respect, the most tragic scenes in Shakespearean drama would have been ruined and Shakespeare would not have been the great dramatist which he is. We can only wonder how we can reconcile such a criticism of Shakespeare with Johnson's high praise of him.

Finally, Johnson condemns Shakespeare for his over-fondness for quibbles. Shakespeare sacrificed reason, propriety, and truth in order to employ a quibble. "A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." There is, undoubtedly, a lot of unnecessary and tedious punning in Shakespeare's plays. But to say, as Johnson does through his comparison of a quibble with the fatal Cleopatra, that punning destroyed Shakespeare's dramatic power, is the height of absurdity. Johnson here sacrifices his sturdy common sense for the sake of an eloquent metaphor.

Johnson makes things much worse when he says that, although there are in Shakespeare's plays scenes of undoubted and lasting excellence, there is not one play which, if it were now performed as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard till the end. Johnson has already greatly disparaged Shakespeare by his foregoing charges, and this observation merely completes the process of denigration. The present writer is too much of a Shakespearean to be able to swallow condemnation of this kind for the satisfaction of hearing the glowing praise offered to Shakespeare by Johnson in the early pages of the *Preface*. Some critics have called the *Preface*, with its praise and blame, a "balanced" estimate. It is a strange notion of a balanced estimate that the blame should be such as to knock the bottom out of the praise previously given. We have here not a balanced estimate. What we get is a contradiction in terms ; it is taking away with one hand what has been given with the other ; it is almost a denial of what had been asserted with such confidence a little earlier.

Q. 3. How does Johnson defend Shakespeare's mixing of tragic and comic elements and how far do you agree with him ?

Or

Discuss Johnson's defence of Shakespeare against the charge of his mingling the tragic and comic elements, indicating the historical background of the matter.

Or

"The censure which he has incurred by mixing comic and tragic scenes deserves more consideration." How does Johnson justify Shakespeare's practice in this regard?

Ans. Referring to the charge that Shakespeare has mixed the comic and tragic scenes, Johnson points out that Shakespeare's plays are not in a "rigorous sense", either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind. Shakespeare's plays exhibit the real state of earthly life which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled in various degrees and endless combinations. Shakespeare depicts the course of the world, in which the loss of one man is the gain of another, in which the reveller is hurrying to his wine, and the mourner to a funeral, in which the malice of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another, and in which many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design. Out of this medley of mingled purposes and chance happenings the ancient poets had, according to the laws which custom had prescribed, selected either the crimes of men (for a tragic treatment), or the absurdities of men (for a comic treatment). Thus rose the two kinds of dramatic writing, known by the names of tragedy and comedy. But not a single Greek or Roman author attempted writing both these kinds either in separate plays or in the same composition.

Shakespeare, says Johnson, has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. In other words, Shakespeare was equally at home in writing tragic and comic plays, and he could combine comic and tragic elements in one and the same play. "Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters," and they sometimes produce sorrow, and sometimes laughter.

This was a practice contrary to "the rules of criticism". But, Johnson says, "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature". The object of literature is to give instruction by pleasing. A play, in which the comic and the tragic have been mingled, is capable of conveying all the intsruction that tragedy or comedy aims at because such a play is closer to the reality of life than either pure tragedy or pure comedy. Nor is it true to say that by this change of scenes (from tragic to comic, or *vice versa*) the passions are interrupted in their progress and that the principal event cannot attain its maximum power to move the reader. The mingling of tragic and comic scenes does not diminish or weaken the vicissitudes of passion that the dramatist aims at. There are many people who welcome comic relief after a scene producing the feeling of melancholy. Furthermore, variety on the whole contributes to pleasure.

No matter what label a play of Shakespeare is given, "Shakespeare's mode of composition is the same : an interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time and

exhilarated at another. But whatever be his purpose, whether to gladden or depress, or to conduct the story without vehemence or emotion, he never fails to attain his purpose." We laugh or feel sad, or we sit silent with quiet expectation, just as he wants us to. Once we understand Shakespeare's plan, most of the criticisms of Rymer and Voltaire lose their validity. The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety, by two sentinels. Iago shouts at Brabantio's window without injury to the scheme of the play, though his wording is rather crude for the taste of a modern audience. The character of Polonius is seasonable and useful ; and even the grave-diggers' conversation can be appreciated. (Voltaire had condemned all these).

It is worth while now taking a look at the historical background of the matter. It is true that, on the whole, the ancient classical dramatists had kept tragedy and comedy strictly apart from each other. Neo-classical drama of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy, France, and even England, had scrupulously tried to observe the line of demarcation between tragedy and comedy. Though comedy was, somewhat grudgingly, allowed to rise into seriousness, and even on occasion to become heroic*, no touch of humour was ever allowed to affect the sustained solemnity of a tragic scene. But Shakespeare was a romantic, not a neo-classic, dramatist. The free use of tragedy and comedy in the same play is one of the most striking and familiar features in the work of Shakespeare and other romantic playwrights of his time. Romantic drama revels in variety of effect, while tragi-comedy, or the mixed play, was, according to Addison, one of the most monstrous inventions that ever entered into a poet's thought. Sir Philip Sidney too, adopting the neo-classical approach, had criticised tragi-comedy : "But besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained." Sidney had admitted that among the ancients there certainly were one or two examples of tragi-comedies but he had insisted that the ancients never mixed "hornpipes and funerals".

Neo-classic criticism showed a curious tendency to out-Greek the Greeks in strictness. Aristotle indeed says that tragedy represents an action which is serious ; and Greek tragedy in practice has little comic relief ; yet it has some. We find some comic elements in Homer himself. (Homer's gods are sometimes used for a comic purpose, as well as men like Thersites or Irus). Further, the nurse in *The Choeophoroe*, Oceanus in *Prometheus*, the Messengers in *Antigone* and *The Bacchae*, the Phrygian of *Orestes*, are all partly comic figures ; still more the Menelaus of *Helen* and the rollicking Heracles of *Alcestis*. We may recall, too, the famous passage at the

*as in some French plays like *Don Sarche d'Aragon* by Corneille and *Don Garcie de Navarre* by Moliere.

close of Plato's *Symposium* where Socrates explains that the same genius should be supreme in comedy and tragedy alike. These words of Socrates may be regarded as the first whisper, as it were, of the coming of Shakespeare.

For the Middle Ages, the mixture of tragic and comic was as natural as breathing, and it produced their best dramatic work. This medieval tradition, transmitted through popular interludes like *Cambises* and *Horestes*, saved the English stage from the excessive solemnity of the classical pedants and Senecan tragedy. The protests of Sidney and others like him proved futile. The greatest Elizabethan tragedies were half the child of comedy, not only because Polonius in *Hamlet*, the Porter in *Macbeth*, and the Fool in *Lear* produce some of their most striking scenes. Character, too, gains as much as plot ; and the tragedies do not profit more by the addition of comic scenes than some of the tragic characters by the acquisition of a sense of humour. Sometimes, indeed, Shakespeare's tragic characters remain throughout as serious as those of the Greek dramatist, Sophocles : we hear no laughter from Macbeth or Othello. But for that very reason Hamlet and Cleopatra (both of whom have a sense of humour) seem to mark a new era in the portrayal of human nature on the tragic stage.

Johnson, it must be pointed out, justifies tragi-comedy on conflicting grounds. Dryden too had occasionally defended mixed plays, but only as the occasion suited : he had condemned them too. But it will hardly do to justify tragi-comedy on Dryden's grounds that contraries set off each other, and then to excuse "the rules of criticism" on the grounds that "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature", and that the mingled drama can be shown to have instructed as well as pleased : this is a characteristically Johnsonian use of the "escape clause".

In the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot has argued that, though human nature may permanently crave for comic relief, it does not follow that this craving should be gratified. Eliot upholds the doctrine of "the unity of sentiment". But it is not clear why permanent human cravings should be thus loftily ignored by artists whose function is surely, at least in part, that they "live to please". And comic relief seems often artistically valuable. Just as the ancient Persians deliberated on weighty decisions, first drunk, then sober, so as to see the matter from widely different viewpoints ; so one may gain by seeing characters and actions from the opposite standpoints of grave and gay. The contrast may give new depth. The characters may grow rounder.

T.S. Eliot also said that the desire for comic relief springs from a lack of the capacity for concentration. If it is a question of concentration, an audience may concentrate better on a crisis if it has relaxed before that. Nature's way is : "Strain—rest—strain—rest".

There is no reason why a tragedy must be absolutely laughterless, and there is equally no reason why a tragedy should not be laughterless. Perhaps only one rule remains valid about humour in tragedy, namely that humour must not clash with the tone of the whole. It is extraordinary how seldom this fault is found in Shakespeare. Mercutio and Thersites, Pandarus and Polonius, the Grave-diggers and the Porter and Cleopatra's Clown are certainly not out of place in the plays in which Shakespeare had depicted them. Nature herself does not colour her creatures more perfectly to their surroundings than Shakespeare has done with these characters.

Johnson is undoubtedly a critic of the neo-classical school. However, in his defence both of Shakespeare's disregard of the unities of time and place and Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic elements, Johnson seems to deviate from the rigid stand which neo-classicism adopted. Strictly speaking, neo-classic theory did not permit the mingling of tragic and comic in the same play. But it is possible to argue that Johnson defends such mingling on the fundamentally neo-classic ground that the imitation of general human nature not only permits but demands it. Shakespeare's plays, combining comedy and tragedy, show real human nature which "partakes of joy and sorrow". Shakespeare merely conveys to us this jostling of joy and sorrow in real life. The rules of criticism do not scare Johnson. If neo-classic theory lays down certain rules, these rules cannot supersede the fundamental requirement of neo-classic theory, namely, that literature should "imitate" nature (that is, the facts of real life). But then this only means that Johnson is unwittingly pointing out a possible contradiction in the critical theory of his time. In some respects, Johnson's acceptance of certain arbitrary conventions was as literal as that of his age. Yet in two important respects (the disregard of unities, and the mingling of the tragic and the comic), he defended Shakespearean drama with such emphasis that he has been hailed as "an outright dissenter against the neo-classic rules and proprieties". Johnson's attitude in this matter may thus be regarded as a sign in him of an individual reaction against the spirit of his age. This attitude is a hint of the approaching end of the era which had begun with the Restoration.

Q. 4. Discuss Johnson's view regarding the "three unities" in drama with special reference to Shakespeare's disregard of the unities of time and place.

Or

What is meant by the "three unities" relating to the construction of a dramatic plot ? How does Johnson comment on Shakespeare's practice in this regard and how far do you agree with him ?

Or

How does Johnson defend Shakespeare's "neglect of the unities, his violation of those laws which have been instituted and established by the joint authority of poets and critics"?

Or

"Indeed, in his defence of Shakespeare's neglect of the unities, he passes over to the side of the enemy, and almost becomes a romantic." Justify.

Ans. Shakespeare's neglect of the unities of time and place, says Johnson, is not really a fault. In his disregard of these two unities, Shakespeare is believed to have violated a law which had been established and recognised jointly by dramatists and critics. But Johnson defends Shakespeare in this matter. Shakespeare's history plays do not, of course, come under the purview of the law of the three unities because of their very nature and because time and place must keep changing in plays of this kind. In his other plays, Shakespeare has largely preserved the unity of action. Although, being the dramatist of nature, Shakespeare does not unfold any hidden design of the story in his plays, his story has generally a beginning, a middle, and an end, as required by Aristotle. There is a logical connection between incident and incident, and the conclusion follows naturally. Some incidents may be superfluous, but the plot as a whole develops gradually and naturally, and the end of the play marks also the end of our expectation.

Before going further into the matter, it would be worth while taking a look at the historical background of the three unities. Two main reasons had been offered in the past in support of this trinity (namely, the three unities), and both these reasons were false. Firstly, it was said that Aristotle had insisted upon them; and secondly that without them a play would be incredible (though not inferior in artistic form). It was chiefly in the name of realism that the unities were advocated. Aristotle had in fact insisted only that the action of a play must have an artistic unity, free of irrelevances. He had also remarked, without forming any theory about it, that the duration of plays was in practice generally limited to twenty-four hours or so ("For tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine its action within the limits of a single revolution of the sun or nearly so; but the time of epic action is indefinite"—*Poetics*). Of the unity of place, Aristotle made no mention at all; an omission which led a French critic to the amazing conclusion that Aristotle left it out because it was so well-known at the time that it did not need his attention. At any rate, Aristotle's object was rather to formulate the practice of the great tragic dramatists than to lay down abstract rules for tragedy. As to that practice, a general adherence to the unities in Greek tragedy was largely the result of

the presence of the Chorus. But there are instances of deviations from the unities of time and place even in Greek drama*.

Passing to later times, we find Horace insisting, like Aristotle, on the unity of action only. It was at the time of the Renaissance that the mischief began. Thus the real source and authority of the unities have to be sought not in the principles or practice of the Greek stage but in the theories of critics who appeared long afterwards. The unities took definite shape among the Italian humanists of the Renaissance, and passed from them into France. The idea gained ground that no intelligent person's imagination could believe a play the action of which covered more than one day and in which the scene shifted from place to place. In English literary criticism, Sir Philip Sidney was probably the first writer of eminence who preached the unities. He wrote : "For where the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time pre-supposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day, there is both many days, and many places, inartificially imagined. But if it be so in *Gorboduc*, how much more in all the rest, where you shall have Asia of one side and Africa of the other...... Now, of time they are much more liberal, for ordinary it is that two young princes fall in love. After many traverses she is got with child, delivered of a fair boy ; he is lost, groweth a man, falls in love, and is ready to get another child ; and all this in two hours' space." Ben Jonson praised himself for observing the unities in his *Volpone*, and he criticised less correct dramatists in the prologue to *Every Man in His Humour*, Milton agreed. But Dryden objected that the unity of place, however it might have been practised by the ancients, was never any of their rules : "we neither find it in Aristotle, Horace, or any other, till the French poets first made it a precept of the stage. The unity of time even Terence himself, who was the best and most regular of them, had neglected."

John Dennis urged the plea of realism in its crudest form in order to defend the unities : "A reasonable man may delude himself so far as to fancy that he sits for the space of twelve hours without removing, eating or sleeping, but he must be a devil that can fancy he does it for a week." But Congreve complained with truth that the unities cost endless pains in the observance without much repayment in the result. Farquhar appealed with a persuasive gesture from Aristotle to the audience.

It remained for Johnson to sweep what was left of the unities into the wastepaper basket. Replying to the advocates of the unities

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*There are intervals of time in *The Persians*, *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *The Suppliants*. There are changes of place in *Ajax* (from the hero's tent to the sea-shore) and in *The Eumenides* (from Delphi to Athens).

of time and place on grounds of realism, Johnson says that no audience ever accepts the performance on a stage to be absolutely true. If the audience cannot believe that, the first act having been presented at Alexandria, the second is being presented in Rome, how could they believe that even the first act took place at Alexandria when they themselves have been sitting in a theatre in London. Likewise, no audience can actually believe that, in point of time, they are witnessing events that took place in the days of Antony and Cleopatra. But if it is possible for the audience to believe that in the first act they were at Alexandria, they can then also believe that in the next act they are in Rome ; and they can also likewise believe the changes in respect of time. If in the first act preparations for war against Mithridates are supposed to have been made in Rome, the result of the war may, without absurdity, be represented in a later act as happening in Pontus. A lapse of months or years can easily be imagined by the audience as having occurred between one act and another. (Long stretches of time can be believed to lapse only between the acts, but not in the course of the same act): "Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination". The spectators take the dramatic performance as a picture of reality. When they see the actors on the stage in a miserable state, they imagine themselves to be miserable for the moment. That much credulity is always there. Otherwise, the spectators know that they are witnessing only a fiction. Events represented on the stage produce pain or pleasure, not because the audience believes them to be true, but because they bring realities to mind.

Concluding this part of his discussion, Johnson says that the unities of time and place are not essential to a good play. These two unities do sometimes add to the pleasure of a play, but they can be sacrificed for the sake of the nobler beauties of variety and instruction. A play which scrupulously observes the rules may be regarded as the product of superfluous and ostentatious art. The highest graces of a play are to copy nature and instruct life. If a dramatist complies with this requirement and can yet observe all the unities, he deserves applause for his accomplishment.

It is true that, as Coleridge subsequently pointed out, Johnson exaggerates the consciousness of the spectators' disbelief, whereas it is most of the time only sub-conscious and suspended. In consequence, Johnson's attack on the unities is open to the objection that similar arguments could be used against any theatrical illusion. For instance, why dress up an actor as a medieval king with crown and sceptre when we know that he is neither medieval nor a king, but a paid player ? But we do need some assistance in suspending our disbelief. Johnson's line of argument is therefore not, strictly speaking, valid. The point is merely that the unities of time and place are superfluous because their infringement is found in practice to offer no real difficulty to the imagination. The imagination is a

winged creature, not a snail. But Johnson's attack on the unities remains one of the finest and wittiest things in his criticism. Little more has since been heard in England of the three unities, and Johnson's arguments were effectively stolen by Stendhal for his attack on them in France. As an aid to illusion, they were never worth what they cost in other ways. How needless they are for illusion, the cinema has further shown. But, as an aid to artistic economy and perfection of form, something may still be gained from a modified respect for them.

Romantic dramatists have always been supremely indifferent to these pedantic rules concerning time and place. Shakespeare cared nothing for them, moving his scene freely from place to place, and "jumping over times". In two cases, it is true,—in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest*—he confines his plot to one day and practically to one spot. But these exceptions only prove that, like other romantic playwrights, Shakespeare felt himself perfectly free to accept as well as to reject academic convention. This romantic freedom seems so natural and proper that it is difficult for us to give any serious attention to the arguments of the neo-classical school. Yet we must never forget that romantic liberty may easily degenerate into licence. Shakespeare himself, with his too rapid and frequent changes of scene within an act, and his total carelessness as to the number of days, or months, or even years required by his action, provides many illustrations of the abuse of freedom. *The Winter's Tale* may be regarded as a glaring example of romantic excess. Such excess is equally conspicuous in Shakespeare's history plays which Johnson excludes from consideration in this context.

For a neo-classical critic like Johnson it was something wonderful to flout a rigid law which demanded the observance of the unities in drama. Johnson's exposure of unities as not being essential to drama is one of the great moments of liberating intelligence in English criticism. In his defence of Shakespeare in this respect and also in respect of Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic scenes, Johnson has been regarded as "an outright dissenter against the neo-classic rules and proprieties". The attitude he adopts in these matters is a signal of the approaching end of the reign of neo-classicism which had begun with the Restoration. This attitude is a pointer to the coming of the Romantic era.

Q. 5. Bring out the salient points of Johnson's judgment of Shakespeare as stated in the *Preface*, adding your comments on each.

Or

Write a critical note on Johnson's views on Shakespeare's dramatic works.

Ans. The *Preface* opens with a tribute to Shakespeare's long-continued popularity, which Johnson considers to be an acceptable

criterion of greatness. No other test of the greatness of literary works* exists "than length of duration and continuance of esteem".

" Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature", says Johnson. The basic requirement of literary greatness, therefore, is fidelity to facts of nature. This is clearly the neo-classic theory of art as imitation. Johnson praises Shakespeare for meeting this requirement fully and most satisfactorily. Says he :

"Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature ; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of world ; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers ; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions : they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find."

Such is the basis of Johnson's high laudation of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's characters, he tells us, "act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion" For Johnson, as for so many critics of his age. it was the duty of a poet to give pleasure by providing accurate pictures of general human nature. The implication is, of course, that human nature, at least civilised human nature, never really changes, because only then can the work of a great author continue to have its validity and appeal through the times to come. So Pope tells us that the Greek and Roman writers showed the best way of imitating nature and that therefore to copy Homer was to copy nature. Pope assumes, of course, that men, in Homer's time were identical with men of his own day, at least in those respects which are of interest to the poet. If a poet is to have the quality of universality, he must be general, not particular, in his treatment of character. Shakespeare appeals to every age because he does not emphasise the differentiating qualities of one time and one place, but concentrates on what men have in common. Similarly, in his novel, *Rasselas*, Johnson had put into the mouth of Imlac his view of the importance of generality. This is how Imlac puts it : "The business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species ; to remark general properties and large appearances ; he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind, and must neglect the minuter discriminations......"

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*that is, "works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific."

By virtue of his knowledge of general human nature Shakespeare was able to fill his plays "with practical axioms and domestic wisdom." He does not deal mainly with love, says Johnson ; he does not depict love as the major human motive and emotion. Other dramatists have tended to concentrate on the love-story with the result that in their work probability has been violated, life has been misrepresented, and language has been depraved. But love is only one of many passions. It has no great influence upon the totality of life. It has, therefore, little operation in the drama of Shakespeare "who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew that any other passion, as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity." Shakespeare's plays are genuinely "the mirror of life". From these plays "a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world and a confessor predict the progress of the passions." Johnson rejects the stricter neo classic demand regarding the portrayal of character. Dennis and Rymer did not approve of Menenius, a senator of Rome, having been depicted by Shakespeare as a buffoon, and Voltaire did not approve of the Danish usurper (in *Hamlet*) being represented as a drunkard. Johnson defends Shakespeare by saying that Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident. Shakespeare's story may require a Roman senator or a king, but he thinks only in terms of men (not particular individuals belonging to a particular time or place).

Johnson then goes on to defend Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic scenes in his dramas. Strictly speaking, neo-classic theory did not permit such mingling in the same play. But Johnson defends it on the fundamentally neo-classic ground that imitation of general human nature not only permits but demands it. Shakespeare's plays, combining comedy and tragedy, show real human nature "which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination." We live in a world in which "the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend." Shakespeare merely conveys to us this jostling of joy and sorrow in real life.

Johnson admits that in defending Shakespeare for his mingling of tragic and comic scenes he is flying in the face of "the rules of criticism." But the rules do not scare him, and he emphatically declares that "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature." If neo-classic theory lays down certain rules, those rules cannot supersede the fundamental requirement of neo-classic theory, namely that literature should "imitate" nature (that is, the facts of real life). But this only means that Johnson is unwittingly pointing out a possible contradiction in the critical theory of his time. If criticism is based on adequate principles with regard to the relationship between art and nature, then an appeal from criticism

to nature is meaningless. If literature aims at a "just representation of general nature", then any rules concerning the proper method of representation should flow from that basic requirement and should not contradict it. But for Johnson the imitative function of literature went side by side with its didactic function. Poetry should instruct by pleasing the reader, he says. It seems at times as if Johnson wanted poetry to instruct the reader in the facts of human psychology. "It may be said that Shakespeare has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials to which it cannot be said to be exposed." Yet Johnson also insisted that literature should instruct the reader in a moral sense, and should help to make him a better man. "It is always a writer's duty to make the world better." From this point of view he finds Shakespeare defective. Shakespeare, he says, "sacrifices virtue to convenience" Shakespeare is "much more careful to please than to instruct." Shakespeare "seems to write without any moral purpose". Shakespeare makes no just distribution of good or evil; he is not always careful to show in the virtuous characters a clear and candid disapproval of wickedness; he carries his characters indifferently through right and wrong, leaving their examples to operate by chance. In these respects Johnson censures Shakespeare.

But Johnson is here faced with a dilemma, though he does not clearly recognise it as such. He wants a poet to represent human nature accurately and vividly. At the same time, he wants his poet to arrange the story in such a manner that it provides moral instruction for the reader, while pleasing him. This is possible only if human nature were in itself essentially noble and edifying. Sir Philip Sidney had argued that poetry should be morally instructive. But he recognised the fact that, human nature being what it is, life does not convey a moral lesson to the observer, and he therefore demanded that the poet should create a new and better world. Johnson wants to have it both ways, which would be fair enough if he believed that the real world was in fact morally edifying. But he knew very well that the real world was far from being so. He almost grapples with his dilemma in a long note on *King Lear*. A play, he says there, in which the wicked prosper and the virtuous are miserable, is a just representation of the common events of human life, but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, a play will not become worse by showing the final triumph of persecuted virtue. Does Johnson then mean that representational adequacy and moral edification are two quite separate qualities, the latter to be added if it does not hurt the former? And is the pleasure we get from "poetic justice",* a wholly separate kind of pleasure from that of recognising, or being instructed in, the truths of human nature?

*Poetic justice" in a play or novel means virtue rewarded and villainy punished.

Johnson repeats the old notion that literature should both please and instruct. He reveals his own earnest, didactice temperament and also his belief that literature will survive only if it continues to give pleasure. In thus stating his point of view, however, he fails to explore all its implications or to resolve the implied contradictions.

Among the faults of Shakespeare is Shakespeare's weakness for conceits and quibbles. Shakespeare, says Johnson, "is not long soft or pathetic without some idle conceit or contemptible equivocation......A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." This objection to Shakespeare's conceits and puns derives from the separation of "wit" and "judgment" insisted on by Addison and first developed in England by Hobbes and Locke. This whole approach to poetic language is important in both the theory and the practice of poetry from Dryden to Johnson ; its critical implications are seen most clearly in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, especially in his discussion of the metaphysical poets.

Johnson defends Shakespeare for his disregard of the unities of time and place. This defence shows Johnson's "sturdy common sense". According to the neo-classic theory, a play on the stage should confine itself to events covering a limited time (twelve or twenty-four hours) and occurring in single place. According to this view, the action on the stage should approximate its dimensions in respect of time and space to those of actual experience. The closer such approximation, the more satisfying the action was believed to-be. Johnson points out that the action of a play is based on certain conventions which the audience readily accepts. If, says Johnson, the audience can accept the convention that a particular actor on the stage is Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, the audience can also accept the convention of shifting scenes from one place to another or conveying the passage of long periods of time. "The necessity of observing the unities of time and place arises from the supposed necessity of making the drama credible", Johnson tells us. But, he says, nobody expects drama credible in *that* way. "The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know from the first act to the last that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players...Where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre ?"

Q. 6 Discuss the contribution of Johnson to Shakespearean criticism.

Or

Write a note on the merits and demerits of Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*.

Or

Discuss the view that Johnson's *Preface* to his Edition of Shakespeare is a masterly piece of literary criticism.

Ans. Johnson's *Preface* is a famous document. The *Preface* and the notes on Shakespeare's plays supplied by Johnson constitute a body of criticism very different from the naive approach of most other contemporary critics. Like his predecessors Johnson sets out in a traditional way to examine beauties and defects, to apportion praise and blame. But unlike them, he also succeeds in conveying his own individual response to the plays. For this reason his assessment is more complex and sophisticated, and also more interesting.

The *Preface* is in essence a brilliant exercise in descriptive criticism with some weighty pronouncements in the field of theoretical criticism, and a long appendix on editorial methods. The *Preface* is firmly grounded, in its opening pages, in Johnsonian theory. Shakespeare, we are told, happily occupies a classic position, like an Ancient, by virtue of his relative antiquity and "continuance of esteem". Shakespeare can claim "the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration". He must therefore be great. And his greatness is of the neo-classic kind. He is, *par excellence*, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places or by the accidents of temporary fashions or opinions. These characters have a universal quality. They act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shahespeare it is commonly a species. In his plays we read human sentiments in human language. No poet has perhaps ever kept his personages more distinct from each other. The dialogue in Shakespearean drama is determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with ease and simplicity. It seems to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences Johnson emphasises the realistic quality of Shakespeare by saying that "Shakespeare has no heroes ; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion". Shakespeare does not give excessive importance to the theme of love. He realised that love is only one of many passions and has no great influence upon the sum of life.

This, then, is the core of Johnson's eulogy of Shakespeare, and this is very sound criticism, there being hardly any observation in all this with which we would disagree. Johnson is also on safe ground in defending Shakespeare's mixing of the tragic and comic scenes in his plays and in his violation of the unities of time and place. This part of the *Preface* again shows Johnson's sharp and

brilliant perception, and is a model of logical demonstration. It is noteworthy that in both these respects he is ahead of contemporary criticism and is a forerunner of romantic criticism with its advocacy of an artist's freedom from the tyranny of rules. Strictly speaking, neo-classic theory did not permit the mingling of tragic and comic scenes. But Johnson makes an appeal from criticism to nature. Shakespeare's plays, combining comedy and tragedy, show real human nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow. We live in a world in which the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend. Shakespeare conveys to us this jostling of joy and sorrow in real life. As for the unities, Johnson points out that the action of a play is based on certain conventions which the audience readily accepts. If the audience can accept the convention that a particular actor on the stage is Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, they can also accept the shifting of scenes from one place to another or the suggestion of the passage of long periods of time. The spectators, says Johnson, know from the first act to the last that the stage is only a stage and the players only players. Johnson also rejects the stricter neo-classic demand regarding the portrayal of character. He gives an effective reply to Dennis and Rymer who did not approve of Menenius, a senator of Rome, having been depicted by Shakespeare as a buffoon, and to Voltaire who did not approve of the Danish usurper in having been represented as a drunkard. Shakespeare, according to Johnson, makes nature predominate over accident.

Johnson gives us a long list of the faults of Shakespeare. This list exposes some of the limitations of Johnson's criticism. Johnson's error here is two-fold. Firstly, he attaches too much importance to the didactic element in literature by complaining that Shakespeare sacrifices virtue to convenience, and that he seems to write without any moral purpose. We cannot agree with Johnson that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better." The business of an artist is to represent or exhibit life as he sees it, and not to inculcate virtue. Secondly, he fails to recognise Shakespeare's greatness as a writer of tragedies. In this connection, Johnson thinks that "in tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more", and that "the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity." This judgment corroborates what he has said a little earlier : "In his tragic scenes there is always something wanting, but his comedy often surpasses expectation or desire. His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct." It has been said that Johnson's preference for Shakespeare's comedies might have been a result of his own temperament. But Johnson was a pessimist by nature, and his failure therefore to appreciate the depth and profundity of Shakespeare's tragic plays shows a strange contradiction. Johnson shows an incapacity to appreciate the sublime aspects of Shakespeare's poetry. This is a serious deficiency in Johnson's criticism.

We cannot help remarking that the extravagant praise of Shakespeare as supremely the poet of nature in the first part of the *Preface* becomes discredited in the light of some of the disparaging remarks that occur later : "We endure in him what we should in another loathe and despise." "He has perhaps not one play which, if it were exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to the conclusion." There are contradictions and inconsistencies in the *Preface*. For instance, having said that Shakespeare seeks his style of expression in the common intercourse of life, Johnson then points out Shakespeare's "tumour", his weak declamation, and inflated vocabulary.

Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare seems, however, to be free from the kind of personal prejudices that mar his criticism of Milton. Johnson would obviously have no quarrel with Shakespeare's social and political views, in so far as these are evident in the poet's writings. Shakespeare's ideal of a harmonious political and personal life based on considerations of social position and status is very much the same as Johnson's ideal of a maximum of personal freedom within a framework of "subordination". At the same time, Johnson shows no interest in the chronological order of Shakespere's plays or in Shakespeare's inner, imaginative life jto be reconstructed from that chronological order. The modern critic thinks of Shakespeare's work as the record of a spiritual ourney. Johnson was incapable of adopting such an approach.

In his exposition of editorial principles, Johnson shows a superb historical understanding. He appeals to the study of background as an antidote to neo-classical rule-of-thumb : "Every man's performance, to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived, and with his own particular opportunities." Such observations foreshadow most nineteenth century historical criticism in its characteristic excesses as well as in its characteristic triumphs. Johnson's realisation that Shakespeare belonged to a particular age enabled him to appreciate the fact that Shakespeare stood very much in need of the services of a commentator or annotator.

Nor must we fail to take notice of Johnson's "notes" on Shakespeare's plays (though these notes are not a part of the *Prefade*). "First, these notes are rich specimens of that learned sport, developed during the Renaissance and enjoying its full-scale vogue in the eighteenth century, of textual emendation. Second, they are a dialectic. To the Shakespearean position—on language, on style and expression, on morality, on everything under the sun,—they juxtapose a Johnsonian position. Thirdly, they stand at the beginning of a whole new tradition of Shakespearean criticism, which after Johnson's death was to proliferate into a substantial literature of its own : the criticism of character."

Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* is one of the noblest monuments of English neo-classic criticism, and at the same time an exposure of some of the weaknesses, contradictions, and unnecessary rigidities of some of the neo-classic principles. At the beginning of Johnson's career, the neo-classical rigidities of Dennis and Rymer were still accepted as truths. "Johnson tries hard to ease them off, like a tight pair of boots." He is, generally speaking, neo-classical in his approach, but above and beyond that he is for life. "In so far as neo-classical criticism is a prison, Johnson tries to dismantle the bars." On the other hand, when neo-classicism is stormed as the French prison (the Bastille) was stormed by the revolutionary mobs, and when the cry in the streets is all for freedom, Johnson remembers that the prison after all is a building which offers shelter from the vagaries of the weather. Johnson's pull is always away from extravagance. This gives his work a mixed character, in which inconsistencies were bound to appear.

Johnson's *Preface* is regarded by some critics as his most brilliant performance. In spite of its inconsistencies and contradictions, there is no piece of general criticism on the same scale that approaches it. He exhibits the excellence of Shakespeare in its fullness and grandeur. He does not hesitate to state Shakespeare's faults, but Shakespeare remains to him the greatest of English authors, and the only author worthy to be ranked with Homer. He also vindicated the liberties of the English stage (namely, the mingling of tragic and comic scenes, and the violation of the unities of time and place). Among the faults of Shakespeare is a weakness for conceits and quibbles. "A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it." This, though an obvious exaggeration, is not without a basis. The objection here derives from the separation of "wit" and "judgment" insisted on by Addison and first developed in England by Hobbes and Locke.

The *Preface*, according to a critic, shows all Johnson's gifts at their best : the lucidity, the virile energy, the individuality of his style ; the unique power of first placing himself on the level of the ordinary man and then lifting the ordinary man to his own level ; the firm insistence on life and reason, not learning or ingenuity, as the standard by which books are to be judged. Shakespeare seems to have inspired Johnson the critic with more even than the latter's usual measure of sanity. Perhaps the very best things in the *Preface* (and in Johnson's notes) are the frequent summonings of ingenious sophistries to the test of a merciless common sense. Johnson shows here that his criticism in general is not a lifeless application of mechanical rules. In fact, the *Preface* shows his emancipation from traditional rules. In the *Preface*, a critic's liberating intelligence is at work. In some respects at least, as already specified above, Johnson's voice is the voice of dissent with

the rules and proprieties of the neo-classic age of which he was not only a product but a solid pillar.

"Never surely has the central praise of Shakespeare, as the master of truth and universality, been better set forth than by Johnson In a series of luminous and eloquent paragraphs Johnson tries Shakespeare by the tests of time, of nature, of universality, and finds him supreme in all. All our faculties are stimulated as we read these paragraphs." This is the greatest merit of Johnson's Shakesperean criticism. But we must qualify this by pointing out that no critic was more ruthless than Johnson in his castigation of what he considered to be Shakespere's faults which are not all faults in our opinion.

Q. 7 What opinion have you formed of Johnson as a critic of Shakespeare ?

Or

Discuss Johnson's critical estimate of Shakespeare and the principles that guided him in his editing of Shakespeare's plays.

Ans. Johnson succeeds in giving us a convincing formulation of a general praise, or eúlogy, of Shakespeare. Not only that he succeeds also in lifting this eulogy a few degrees above the level of the already éloquent tradition. Ben Jonson had given high praise to Shakespeare. Dryden had described Shaskespeare as "the man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul......" (Johnson quotes this passage from Dryden at the end of his *Preface to Shakespeare*, and in his *Life of Dryden* he referred to it as "a perpetual model of encomiastic criticism"). Johnson opens his *Preface* with a series of hyperbolic statements :

"The poet of whose works I have undertaken the revision may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration."

"Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."

"Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."

"In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual ; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species."

"His real power is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable and the tenor of his dialogue......"

Shakespeare has no heroes ; his scenes are occupied only by men......"

A noteworthy point is that Johnson shows himself in the *Preface* as "an outright dissenter against the neo-classic rules and proprieties" which had for a long time inhibited the full appreciation of Shakespeare. The freedom which Johnson allowed himself was, however, severely limited as he encountered the immediate surface of Shakespeare's plays—either individual scenes of certain kinds or the terms of dialogue, the rhetorial elaborations, the play of words, etc. The portion of the *Preface* in which Johnson gives us a catalogue of Shakespeare's defects is not likely to be a favourite with the modern critic. Shakespeare, we are told, "makes no just distribution of good or evil." He omits opportunities of instructing or delighting. He is guilty of anachronisms. In his comic scenes his jests are commonly gross and his pleasantry licentious. In his tragedies he runs into tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity. He no sooner begins to move than he counteracts himself; the terror and pity which he arouses are checked and nullified by a certain frigidity on his part. He is foolishly fond of quibbles : "A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it."

What Johnson finds irresistible in Shakespeare is not "the splendour of particular passages" but the whole "progress of his fable and the tenor of his dialogue." It is not therefore clear how this division in Johnson's appreciation became possible, how he perceived the progress and tenor of the drama except through the particulars of actions and words. There is doubtless an unresolved tension here between Johnson's neo-classic conscience and the liberating impulse in him.

Johnson's defence of Shakespeare's irregularities is based on broad principles of dramatic structure. A more obvious part of this defence concerns the well-known (pseudo-Aristotelian) unities of time and place. This defence did not need much real daring on Johnson's part. Johnson's arguments can be found a century earlier in the prefaces of Dryden's opponent, Sir Robert Howard, or at the turn of the eighteenth century in Farquhar's *Discourse Upon Comedy.* Yet the issue was still alive. Johnson at least pretends to be afraid of "the fame and the strength of those that maintain the contrary opinion." In any case, Johnson goes immediately to the heart of the matter and puts his finger on the false belief by which the exaggerated doctrine of the unities had so long been upheld. This belief was the assumption that the aim of drama is literal verisimilitude, or "the supposed necessity of making the drama credible." And he gives a death-blow to the doctrine of the unities :

"He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation."

"The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players."

"Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination."

The other matter in which Johnson ranks as a liberal defender of Shakespeare pertains to what he calls mingled drama. In this matter one of Johnson's opponents was Voltaire, who held the view that Shakespeare was a genius who had not a spark of good taste and not the slightest knowledge of the laws of art. Johnson justifies Shakespeare's representing Menenius as a buffoon (a fact to which Dennis had objected), and Shakespeare's depicting the Danish usurper as a drunkard (to which Voltaire objected). But Johnson's argument here brings him to the brink of a difficult situation. Is general human nature pure or impure? Or is it pure and impure by turns? Or is it both pure and impure at the same time? And what, on any of these suppositions, are the appropriate feelings? Within a few pages, as has been indicated above, Johnson will be complaining that in Shakespeare's plays "terror and pity are checked and blasted by sudden frigidity." But now, with Voltaire and the drunken Danish usurper, Dennis and the senatorial buffoon, in good focus, with the whole progress and tenor of plays doubtless in mind, Johnson proceeds into a wider arena and undertakes to defend Shakespeare against the objection that he mixes his comic and tragic scenes. And his defence is energetic, earnest, and profound. This defence is one of the few most pregnant passages of dramatic criticism written in England during the eighteenth century. Shakespeare, says Johnson, exhibits the real state of human nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow. Shakespeare expresses the course of the world in which the loss of one is the gain of another, in which the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend. "Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. This is a practice contrary to the rules of criticism, but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature."

One difference between Johnson and many other critics of his own time is the fullness and depth with which he responds to a work of literature and to the author of that work. Johnson responds with a massive movement of his massive personality. Some of his statements seem to show a direct confrontation of his personality with that of the author he is dealing with. Johnson's criticism of Milton especially shows this. But we see Johnson's personality entering into his criticism of Shakespeare also. Here are some of his memorable comments which we find in his notes on the individual plays of Shakespeare :

"I know not how the ladies will aprove the facility with which both Rosalind and Celia give away their hearts."

"I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram."

"But Falstaff, unimitated, unimitable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee ?"

"Polonius is subject to sudden dereliction of his faculties."

"This speech is too horrible to be read or to be uttered." (*Hamlet*, Act III, scene iii).

"I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene. It is not to be endured." (*Othello*, Act V, scene ii).

In the manner of his editing Shakespeare's plays, we again see Johnson's personality at work. Johnson administers many rebukes to the previous editors of Shakespeare, expressing his solemn astonishment at their vanity and their bungling, and dismissing them in curt terms. In the *Preface* he expresses his admiration for some of the editors, and declares a kind of general truce. But he has his joke at their expense often enough in the course of his comments on the plays. Apart from this, he makes a number of odd remarks. Such are his notes on the mandrake root, the jewelled toad, the glow-worm's eyes, the serpent's tongue, his repeatedly raised eyebrows at the horns of cuckoldry, his confident pronouncement about the tailor in *King John*, who in a hurry thrusts his slippers upon contrary feet. His comment on the punishment, which the virtuous Cordelia suffers in *King Lear*, is difficult to reconcile with his defence of mingled or incongruous feelings in the *Preface*. Johnson is a man of powerful and spontaneous responses to Shakespearean drama. But his emotional responses are more like the standard ones of his time. His responses are quite close to the theoretical neo-classic norm, to the ideal of rational orderliness, to the contemporary spirit of optimism and benevolism. This, however, does not mean that his defence of mingled drama was a mere abstract and thin affair which he undertook in opposition to his own genuine responses. There was nothing to coerce him into that defence. Perhaps this defence is a testimony to his theoretical intelligence, but at the same time it would seem to be tied to his strongly religious sense of mystery in the universe. On the whole, we find Johnson, in his Shakespearean criticism, to be far from the perfect neo-classic critic.

As for his editorial principles, Johnson held very sound views about the philological part of an editor's duties. His performance in this respect was, by modern standards, uneven, capricious, often sadly deficient. But by the standards of his own day, this performance was extraordinary. In the field of textual collation, Johnson did only a spotty job. But he restored many readings of the First Folio. He was the first editor to give the due importance to the authority of the First Folio. In the field of explication of difficult passages in Shakespeare, Johnson relied chiefly on his own robust good sense and general awareness of human nature. But now and then he also made use of the historical perspective which he had

learned in his *Dictionary*. He wrote a number of notes which were repeated by subsequent editors of Shakespeare. He exercised a commendable restraint in the field of emendation. He was much less sceptical than his predecessors regarding his author's text. ("It has been my settled principle that the reading of the ancient books is probably true." "I have adopted the Roman sentiment, that it is more honourable to save a citizen than to kill an enemy"). In one respect, he showed a strange neglect. He was not much interested in Shakespeare's sources. This is a deficiency which is hard to condone.

Q. 8. Write a brief essay on Johnson's norms of critical evaluation in the light of your reading of his *Preface to Shakespeare*.

Or

Consider Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* as an illustration of the neo-classical tenents of literary criticism to which Johnson subscribed.

Or

What is the critical position and attitude adopted by Johnson in his approach to Shakespeare's plays as stated in his *Preface to Shakespeare*.

Ans. Johnson's Shakespearean criticism reveals clearly the neo-classical standards or norms of evaluation. In other words, Johnson, in his approach to Shakespeare's work, adopts, on the whole, a neo-classical attitude which is perfectly in consonance with his own nature as well as the spirit of the age in which he lived. This neo-classical attitude is seen in (*i*) his impersonality or objectivity of assessment ; (*ii*) his emphasis on literature as a faithful picture of human life and character ; (*iii*) the importance he gives to the didactic element in literature ; (*iv*) his incapacity to appreciate the higher or sublimer qualities of poetry ; and (*v*) his procedure in pointing out "merits" and "faults" of the poet he is dealing with.

Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays helped to confirm Johnson's reputation as a scholar and a man of letters. Johnson read Shakespeare's plays as dramatic narratives, not as thematic poems, and displayed a lively and discriminating, if not decidedly poetic, intelligence in grappling with plot and character. His estimate of Shakespeare is an example of close reasoning, and his cool and dispassionate objectivity is ultimately compelling and persuasive. His work on Shakespeare is entirely free of any of the personal prejudices that occur in his comments on Milton. He would obviously have no quarrel with Shakespeare's social and political views, in so far as these are clearly expressed in the poet's writings. Johnson, indeed, wrote little about Shakespeare the man as distinct from the author. He did not concern himself with the inner, imaginative life of Shakespeare, as a modern critic would.

He does not show any interest in the chronological order of Shakespeare's plays or in any question arising therefrom. The modern critic thinks of Shakespeare's work as the record of a spiritual journey, in which the poet passed through one period after another. Johnson has no notion of such an approach.

The gist of Johnson's eulogy of Shakespeare is also neo-classical in essence. Johnson elevates Shakespeare to his throne among poets on the ground that Shakespeare is the poet of nature, that is, human nature. Shakespeare's drama is the mirror of life. He shows us human existence as it is so that, by reading his plays, "a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions." In this respect Johnson's estimate of Shakespeare is the same as his estimate of Homer. Homer, according to Johnson, had gone beyond the locally accidental and incidental, and arrived at the basic truth about human life. Shakespeare had done the same. Shakespeare's characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, by the peculiarities of studies or professions, or by the accidents of temporary fashions and opinions. His characters are the genuine offspring of common humanity, such as the world will always supply. They act and speak by the influence of passions and principles which are universal. A character in Shakespeare is not just an individual but a whole species. In saying this, Johnson gives to Shakespeare what is evidently the height of praise from a classical point of view. Johnson's *Preface* is neo-classical also in its "preference for broad philosophical generalisations which have nothing to do with historicity."

For Johnson, as for so many critics of his age, it was the duty of a poet to give pleasure by providing accurate pictures of general human nature. The implication is, of course that human nature, at least civilized human nature, never really changes, because only then can the work of a great author continue to have its validity and appeal through the times to come. Shakespeare appeals to every age because he does not emphasise the differentiating qualities of one time and one place, but concentrates on what men have in common. In his novel, *Rasselas*, Johnson had put into the mouth of Imlac his view on the importance of generality : "The business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species ; to remark general properties and large appearances ; he does not number the streaks of the tulip......"

By virtue of his knowledge of general human nature Shakespeare was able to fill his plays "with practical axioms and domestic wisdom". Shakespeare gives evidence of having seen things with his own eyes. The images which he gives us are such as his own mind had directly received. Nor does Shakespeare deal mainly with love ; he does not depict love as the major human motive and emotion. Other dramatists have tended to concentrate on the love-story, with the result that in their work probability has been

violated and life has been misrepresented. But love is only one of many human passions. It has therefore a limited role in the plays of Shakespeare. The basic requirement of literary greatness is fidelity to facts of nature. Shakespeare meets this requirement fully and most satisfactorily, thus conforming to the neo-classical theory of art as imitation.

Johnson's neo-classical standard of judgment is seen also in pointing out Shakespeare's indifference to the requirements of morality in his plays. Shakespeare's chief defect as a dramatist, according to Johnson, is that he "sacrifices virtue to convenience". Shakespeare is more careful to please than to instruct. The result is that he "seems to write without any moral purpose". The moral precepts and axioms which occur in his plays seem to have dropped from Shakespeare only casually. Besides, Shakespeare makes no just distribution of good or evil. He is not always careful to make his virtuous characters express their frank disapproval of wickedness. He carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong, and at the end dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance. In Johnson's opinion it is always a writer's duty to make the world morally better, and in this duty Shakespeare has failed. Needless to say, Johnson's emphasis on didacticism in literature merely jars upon us and shows the limitations of the neo-classical theory. We today would agree with Keats who disapproved of poetry "that has a palpable design on us". Shelley too declared that didacticism was his abhorrence. The business of the artist is not to inculcate virtue or to preach moral lessons through his work; his function is to exhibit life, to communicate to us his vision of life.

In pointing out certain other faults of Shakespeare, also, Johnson shows his neo-classical bent of mind. Shakespeare's plots, we are told, are often very loosely formed and carelessly pursued. In many of his plays the latter part does not receive much of the author's attention. The catastrophe is sometimes imperfectly represented. Shakespeare shows no regard to distinction of time or place. He violates chronology and is guilty of anachronisms (though Sir Philip Sidney was also a culprit in this regard). The witty exchanges in Shakespeare's plays are generally indecent or coarse. There is an undue pomp of diction and unnecessary verbiage and repetition in the plays. Shakespeare's language is often intricate, and his vocabulary high-sounding and inflated even when the sentiments are trivial. A quibble was to Shakespeare "the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it." Allowing for a little exaggeration here and there, it will be hard for us to disagree with Johnson in this analysis of Shakespeare's faults. Here, as in the case of the emphasis on a fidelity to the facts of life, we see the wholesome side of neo-classicism. Johnson's objection to Shakespeare's conceits and puns derives from the separation of "wit" and "judgment" insisted on by Addison and

first developed in England by Hobbes and Locke. This whole approach to poetic language is important in both the theory and the practice of poetry from Dryden to Johnson ; its critical implications are seen most clearly in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, especially in his discussion of the Metaphysical poets.

But neo-classicism, as has already been hinted at, had its limitations. We have noted this limitation in the excessive importance given to the ethical or moral value of literature. We see this limitation also in Johnson's failure to appreciate the grander or sublimer aspects of Shakespeare's poetry. Johnson is not unresponsive to either atmosphere or tragic emotion (as will be seen in the notes he wrote on the various plays of Shakespeare). But he has little feeling for Shakespeare's power of transcending common speech, and his power of adding an indescribable beauty and significance to the plain meaning of the words. It is Johnson's deficiency in this respect that makes him think that Shakespeare is far greater in comedy than in tragedy : "In tragedy Shakespeare often writes with great appearance of toil and study, what is written at last with little felicity ; but in his comic scenes, he seems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve." "His tragedy seems to be skill, his comedy to be instinct." Many of the remarks in the *Preface* can be related to that set of literary and dramatic conventions which the eighteenth century endorsed and accepted. The eighteenth century critics regarded a play as a convincing imitation of real events and real people. Hence they wanted the soliloquies to be properly motivated, and not just addressed to the audience. Hence also they thought it inappropriate that a character suffering the stress of strong emotion should use highly-wrought imagery or employ word-play in his speeches. This view also explains to some extent Johnson's surprising stricture (quoted above) on the tragic plays of Shakespeare.

In some respects, as we have seen, Johnson's acceptance of certain arbitrary conventions was as literal as that of his age. Yet in two important respects he defended Shakespearean drama with such emphasis that he has been regarded as an opponent of the neo-classical rules and proprieties. He justifies Shakespeare's mingling of tragic and comic scenes on the ground that there is always "an appeal open from criticism to nature". No less forcible is his defence of Shakespeare's violation of the unities of time and place. He rejects also the stricter neo-classical demand regarding the portrayal of character, effectively refuting the arguments of Dennis and Rymer, and of Voltaire.

Finally, Johnson is neo-classical in the "judicial" method that he adopts in his evaluation of Shakespeare. Like his predecessors, he sets out in a traditional way to examine "beauties" and "defects", to apportion praise and blame. One result of this is a curious inconsistency. The extravagant praise of Shakespeare as supremely the poet of nature in the first part of the *Preface* becomes discredited

in the light of some of the disparaging remarks that occur later. Johnson gives us two catalogues—one of the reasons for his veneration and admiration of Shakespeare, and the other of the charges and accusations which he brings against the bard.

Q. 9. To what extent is Johnson's Shakespearean criticism distorted by the ethical assumptions of the age of which he was one of the main spokesmen ?

Or

"He sacrifices virtue to convenience." Examine this dictum of Johnson regarding Shakespeare, commenting on the validity of the criterion here implied.

Or

Discuss the didactic note in Johnson's approach to Shakespeare's plays in his *Preface*.

Ans. On the whole, Johnson applies neo classical standards of criticism to Shakespeare and other poets whom he has discussed in his critical work. A serious moral tone is prominent everywhere in his work, and in this respect, as in several others, he is a genuine representative of the neo-classicism of the eighteenth century. He accepted without question the classical view that works of art should both please and instruct. He wrote the *Lives of the Poets* "in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety". In all his tastes and standards, he was a thorough-going conservative, holding fast to the principles of the Augustan school of poetry, and stoutly resisting every movement of revolt against what he regarded as the orthodox literary creed.

Giving a catalogue of what Johnson regards as the faults of Shakespeare, he mentions first of all Shakespeare's indifference to morality. Shakespeare, he says, sacrifices virtue to convenience, and this is a defect to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men Shakespeare is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems "to write without any moral purpose". Whatever moral precepts and axioms occur in his plays are 'casual" observations. Nor is Shakespeare always careful to make his virtuous characters express their frank disapproval of wickedness. He makes no just distribution of good or evil. He carries his characters indifferently through right or wrong. At the end of a play he dismisses them without further attention, leaving their examples to operate by chance. This fault, according to Johnson, is serious "for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place."

The question that arises here is whether a writer may be accused of sacrificing virtue just because he does not professedly inculcate it. Should we except a writer to be, by intention, a preacher or a moral philosopher ? It is doubtless always the duty of a *moralist* to strive to make the world better. But it is more than enough for a *comic poet* to be able to divert and amuse the

world without making it worse. Besides, Johnson himself admits in the same context that "a system of social duty may be selected from Shakespeare's writings". What more does Johnson, then, expect from a dramatist ? The moral precepts and axioms should be all the more welcome to Johnson for dropping casually from the writer's pen. If at all morality is to be preached through a work of art, it should be done unobtrusively, in passing, as it were. In any case, Shakespeare did not know that the "rules" of criticism required the drama to preach moral lessons. Nor did he think himself bound as a *poet* to write like a *philosopher*. Shakespeare "carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong" for the same reason as he makes them laugh and cry in the same piece. In other words, Shakespeare's attitude *vis-a vis* morality may be justified on the same principle as his mingling of tragic and comic scenes. This principle is a strict imitation of nature ; and Shakespeare is "the poet of nature". If Shakespeare had lived in the eighteenth century and had possessed Johnson's critical knowledge, he might not have sacrificed virtue to convenience.

Johnson's insistence that literature should instruct the reader in a moral sense, and should help to make him a better man, brings him face to face with a dilemma, though he does not clearly recognise it as such. He wants a poet to represent human nature accurately and vividly. At the same time, he wants his poet to arrange the story in such a manner that it provides moral instruction for the reader while pleasing him. This is possible only if human nature were in itself essentially noble and edifying. Sir Philip Sidney had argued that poetry should be morally instructive. But he recognised the fact that, human nature being what it is, life does not convey a moral lesson to the observer ; and he therefore domanded that the poet should create a new and better world. Johnson wants to have it both ways, which would be fair enough if he believed that the real world was in fact morally edifying. But he knew very well that the real world was far from being so. He almost grapples with his dilemma in his note on *King Lear*. A play, he says there, in which the wicked prosper and the virtuous are miserable, is a just representation of the common events of human life ; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, a play will lose nothing by showing the final triumph of persecuted virtue. Is it not strange that, while on one hand Johnson demands fidelity to actual life, he on the other demands that a play should show the final triumph of persecuted virtue ? In other words, Johnson's own insistence on the neo-classical ideal of realism in literature clashes with his own neo-classical ideal of didacticism in literature. Obviously, then, didacticism is regarded by Shakespeare as a higher ideal than even adherence to the facts of life. The contradiction that is involved here is obvious and seems not to have been noticed by Johnson. If neo-classic theory lays down certain rules, these rules cannot supersede the fundamental requirement of neo-classic

theory, namely, that literature should "imitate" nature. It is unfortunate that Johnson did not in this particular context apply his formula of "an appeal from criticism to nature" which he used in his discussion of tragi-comedy.

The fact is that Johnson held a pessimistic view of human nature. He believed that the fear of punishment was a necessary stimulus to virtue, and that men would desist from evil only if justice was seen to be operating in the world. As a strongly moralistic critic, he expected a work of art to demonstrate the same kind of strict justice which he wanted to find, but did not find, in real life. For this reason, he was particularly offended that Shakespeare allowed "the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause". Indeed, the ending of *King Lear* disturbed him deeply. Johnson seems to agree with Dennis who maintained that the justice which a dramatist dispensed to his characters ought to be a type of God's final judgment. The death of the apparently innocent Cordelia could not therefore have been approved by Johnson.

Johnson as a man and as a Christian had every right to believe that "there are laws of higher authority than those of criticism." But as a critic he was wrong in thinking that a poet had a duty to preach specific moral lessons and to inculcate specific moral virtues through his work. The very objectivity which offended Johnson is now regarded as one of Shakespeare's most prominent merits. Like Keats, we hate "poetry that has a palpable design upon us". The fact of the matter is that eighteenth-century standards of judgment were different from those of the romantic writers of the Elizabethan age, and our standards are different from those of the eighteenth century. We cannot, therefore, help deploring Johnson's emphasis on the didactic quality of literature and for regaroing as a defect what is really a merit in Shakespeare's work. The whole passage in which Johnson deals with this supposed defect of Shakespeare's dramatic work is a serious flaw in Johnson's Shakespearean criticism as found in the *Preface*.

Aristotle had said that literature was an imitation of life, and he had also implied that the poet was concerned with truth, though not with the truth of the moralist but with truth as looked at from the aesthetic angle. For Aristotle the distinction between didactic literature (that is, literature which informs or instructs) and literature which depends upon aesthetic perception, was important. Aristotle recognised that the function of literature was to please. But he did not emphasise the didactic aspect of literature at all. The pleasure, which tragedy gives, resulted, according to him, from the *katharsis* of the feelings of pity and fear. Horace, however, said that the aim of poetry was to instruct, or to delight, or both. This maxim, "to instruct and to delight", became a proverb of literary criticism throughout the later ages. The teachings of Horace occupied a prominent position in eighteenth century criticism. But Longinus, in his discussion of

the sublime, had stated that the end of poetry was ecstasy, or transport, or "lifting the reader out of himself". Sir Philip Sidney in the Elizabathan age felt compelled to write a defence of poetry. He followed Horace in maintaining that "delightful teaching is the end of Poesy". But Sidney knew well enough that poetry can "move". "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas", he writes, "that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet". Then came Dryden. He cleared away the ancient stumbling-block of criticism, the doctrine that the aim of the artist was to instruct or to make men better in some respects. Dryden asserts that the aim of the artist is not to teach but to please. Instruction may result from the reading of poetry, but is not its end ; for "poesy only instructs as it delights."

Johnson's emphasis on moral instruction or moral improvement as a principal function of literature was a result partly of his own nature and temperament and partly of the spirit of the age which produced him. This emphasis gives a wrong direction to his Shakespearean criticism. Today it is impossible for us to adopt the Johnsonian approach. We know that to teach or to instruct is the function of the moralist, and that it is the business of the artist *to show*. "Life ought to be like that", says the moralist. "Life looks like that", says the artist. The function of the moralist is to exhort. The function of the artist is to exhibit. The aim of the one is to influence action and conduct. The aim of of the other is to awaken perception and to deepen the sensibility. We expect an artist to give us a deeper insight into life, and not necessarily to make us "better" men. Johnson's error in this context is obvious.

10. Discuss Johnson's editorial methods in respect of Shakespeare's plays.

Or

What does Johnson tell us about his procedure in editing Shakepeare's plays ?

Ans. Johnson tells us that he has supplied three kinds of notes in his Edition of Shakespeare's plays : (*i*) illustrative by which difficulties are explained ; (*ii*) judicial, by which faults and beauties are pointed out ; and (*iii*) emendatory, by which corrupt lines or passages are corrected. Some of these notes, he says, are borrowed from others because he accepts them as correct.

In spite of the labours of his various predecessors, Johnson found many passages in Shakespeare's plays which the majority of readers would not be able to understand He has explained such passages. But his explanations are neither unduly copious nor unduly economical. He thinks that those, who were before frightened of reading Shakespeare's plays, would now read them with some confidence. Some passages, says Johnson, were allowed to remain unexplained because he himself did not understand them. He left the explanations of such passages to future editors. Then

there were passages which were neglected or misunderstood previously. These have been explained by him, some briefly and others at length and laboriously.

Johnson tells us that he has not been very industrious in pointing out poetical beauties or defects. He has provided a few judicial observations in the case of some plays, and more such observations in the case of others, depending not on the merits of the plays themselves but on his own caprice. Every reader should form his own judgments, but some initiation is necessary. Johnson has, accordingly, provided the necessary guidance, leaving the reader to make his own discoveries and form his own critical judgments about the plays of Shakespeare.

To the end of most plays Johnson has added brief judgments containing a general praise of excellence or a condemnation of faults. He admits that his examination of the plays has not been minute. Thus the plays which he has condemned may contain much that is praiseworthy, and those which he has praised may contain much deserving of condemnation. While Johnson's candour here is to be appreciated, no critic can damn himself more than by such a confession of negligence.

Johnson admits also that, as the greater part of the plays were available only in one copy, he could not avoid the danger and difficulty of conjecture in the matter of emendation of corrupted passages. He has made use of some of the emendations of every previous editor ; some of the emendations he has rejected without mentioning them ; some he has mentioned in the notes without either expressing approval or disapproval ; and some he has included with his adverse comments. The least that we can say here is that Johnson has been quite haphazard in his procedure in this respect.

Johnson found that Rowe's regulation of the text of many passages had been accepted even where it was arbitrary or wrong. Johnson therefore rectified such corruptions, because the history of the English language and the true force of words could only be preserved by keeping the text of authors free from corruption. Other editors had smoothed the cadence or regulated the metre ; but Johnson did not exercise much effort on these matters. The emendations /which were supplied by a comparison of copies have been inserted by him in the the text, sometimes without notice, and sometimes with an account of the reasons for the change. He did not avail himself of much freedom in the field of conjecture. He believed that the reading of the old books should not be disturbed just for the sake of elegance, clarity, or improvement of the sense. In this matter, Johnson followed the middle path between presumption and timidity, rescuing many lines and many scenes from corrections which were uncalled for but which have been ·made by certain editors in their over-enthusiasm.

Johnson has preserved the customary distribution of the plays into Acts, though he believes that this distribution has little authority behind it. An Act, he says, should cover that much of a drama as passes without any intervention of time or change of place. A pause would therefore mean the beginning of a new Act. The restriction of having only five Acts was thus arbitrary. Shakespeare knew this and so he wrote his plays in one unbroken continuity.

Johnson has not been very particular about restoring Shakespeare's original punctuation. This matter is trifling. He has avoided inserting his own readings in the text because he did not wish to rely much on conjecture. Wherever he has been guided by conjecture, the text has on the whole remained uninjured. Nor has he written lengthy notes. There is no need to alter a text if the alteration requires a lengthy justification. He found that the editors of Shakespeare had been struggling with their own sophistry and confused by their own learning. He did not wish to make the same mistake. That does not mean that conjectural criticism does not have its merits. Such criticism has exercised many powerful minds, such as Richard Bentley.

Johnson admits that he is not satisfied with his performance as an editor of Shakespeare's plays. However, he has attempted to restore every single passage that appeared to him to be corrupt, and he has tried to explain every single passage that seemed to him obscure. In the case of many other passages, he has confessed his incapacity. Wherever he himself could not understand a passage, he has acknowledged the fact. Where it was not necessary for him to make any comment, he has not done so ; and where others have said enough he has desisted from saying anything.

He who really wants to enjoy Shakespeare should first read the plays from beginning to end without any help from annotators or commentators. Only when the reader has done so and enjoyed the pleasures of novelty, should he turn to the commentators and try to get exact meanings. It seems to Johnson that the editors of Shakespeare's plays have not added much to Shakespeare's power of pleasing his readers. It is to be deplored, says Johnson, that a writer like Shakespeare should need a commentary, and that his language should become obsolete or his sentiments obscure.

Johnson concludes by saying that every work of this kind by its very nature falls short of perfection and that he would not therefore feel disappointed if his attempt were found to be unsatisfactory by those who are competent to pass judgment.

There was nothing new in Johnson's methods as an editor. He aimed only at doing better what had been done already, and produced an edition of the old fashion at a time when the science of Shakespearean editing was about to make a distinct advance. But he had qualifications sometimes wanting in editors with more painful habits or more ostentatious equipment—a good knowledge of

Elizabethan English, and imperturbable common sense. Like almost every text of Shakespeare that had yet appeared, it was based on the text of the most recent edition. What he sent to the printer was Warburton's text revised. But he worked on the "settled principle that the reading of the ancient books is probably true", and learned to distrust conjecture. His collation was never methodical; his weak eyesight was a serious hindrance to an exacting task. But he restored many of the readings of the First Folio and, carrying on the system of combination that had been started by Pope, was the first to detect and admit many of the readings of the Quartos. He produced a text which, with all its shortcomings, was nearer the originals than any that had yet appeared. Some of his emendations, which are always modest and occasionally minute, find an unsuspected place in modern editions. Though his text has long been superseded, the advance of scholarship will never impair the value of his notes. It was his proud boast that not a single passage in the whole work had appeared to him corrupt which he had not endeavoured to restore, or obscure which he had not endeavoured to illustrate; and it did not go beyond the truth. No edition, within its limits, is a safer guide to Shakespeare's meanings. The student, who searches commentators for help in difficulties, soon learns to go straight to Johnson's notes. The same robust honesty gives the *Preface* a place by itself among critical pronouncements on Shakespeare.

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